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

**MATTHEW-019. THE SIXTH BEATITUDE by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God."*

*Matthew 5:8*

AT first hearing one scarcely knows whether the character described in this great saying, or the promise held out, is the more inaccessible to men. The pure in heart': who may they be? Is there one of us that can imagine himself possessed of a character fitting him for the vision of God, or such as to make him bear with delight that dazzling blaze? They shall see God, whom no man hath seen at any time, nor can see. Surely the requirement is impossible, and the promise not less so. But does Jesus Christ mock us with demands that cannot be satisfied, and dangle before us hopes that can never be realised? There have been many moralists and would-be teachers who have done that. What would be the use of saying to a man lying on a battlefield sore wounded, and with both legs shot off, If you will only get up and run, you will be safe? What would be the use of telling men how blessed they would be if they were the opposite of what they are? But that is not Christ's way.

These words, lofty and remote as they seem, are in truth amongst the most hopeful and radiant that ever came from even His lips. For they offer the realisation of an apparently impossible character, they promise the possession of an apparently impossible vision; and they soothe fears, and tell us that the sight from which, were it possible, we should sometimes fain shrink, is the source of our purest gladness. So there are three things, it seems to me, worth our notice in these great words--How hearts can be made pure; how the pure heart can see God; and how the sight can be simple blessedness.

**I. How hearts can be made pure.**

Now, the key which has unlocked for us, in previous sermons, the treasures of meaning in these Beatitudes, is especially necessary here. For, as I have said, if you take this to be a mere isolated saying, it becomes a mockery and a pain. But if you connect it, as our Lord would have us connect it, with all the preceding links of this wreathed chain describing the characteristics of a devout soul, then it assumes an altogether different appearance. The pure in heart are they who have exercised and received the previous qualifications and bestowments from God. That is to say, there must precede all such purity as is capable of the divine vision, the poverty of spirit which recognises its true condition, the mourning which rightly feels the gravity and awfulness of that condition, the desire for its opposite, which will never be the hunger and thirst of a soul, except it is preceded by a profound sense of sin and the penitence that ensues thereupon.

But when these things have gone before, and when they have been accompanied, as they surely will be, with the results that flow from them without an interval of time--viz. enrichment with possession of the kingdom, the comforting and drying of the tears of penitence, and the possession of a righteousness bestowed because it is desired, and not won because it is worked for--then, and only then, will the heart be purged and defecated from its evils and its self-regard, and its eyes opened and couched and strengthened to behold undazzled the eternal light of God. The word of my text, standing alone, ministers despair. Regarded where Christ set it, as one of the series of characteristics which He has been describing, it kindles the brightest and surest hope.

Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots? No; but God can change them; and the implication of my text, regarded in its due relation to these other Beatitudes, is just that the requisite purity is not of man's working, but is God's gift. The same truth which here results from the study of the place of our text in this series is condensed into a briefer, but substantially equivalent, form in the saying of another part of the New Testament, about purifying their hearts by faith.

Dear brethren, we come back to the old truth--all a man's hope of, and effort after, reformation and self-improvement must begin with the consciousness of sin, the lament over it, the longing for divine goodness, the opening of the heart for the reception thereof; and only then can we rise to these serene heights of purity of heart. This, and this alone, is the way by which a clean thing can be brought out of an unclean one. and men stained and foul with evil, and bound under the chains of that which is the mother of all evil, the undue making themselves the centres of their lives, can be washed and cleansed and emancipated, and God be made the end and the aim, the motive and the goal, the power and the reward, of all their work. Righteousness is a gift to begin with, and it is a gift bestowed on condition of repentance toward God, and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. We all have longings after purity, suppressed, dashed, contradicted a thousand times in our lives day by day, but there they are; and the only way by which they can be fully satisfied is when we go with our foul hands, empty as well as foul, and lift them up to God, and say, Give what Thou commandest, even the clean heart, and we shall be clean.

But then, do not let us forget, either, that this gift bestowed not once and for ever, but continuously if there be continuous desire, is to be utilised, appropriated, worked into our characters, and worked out in our lives, by our own efforts, as well as by our own faith. Having, therefore, these promises, dearly beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiniess of flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of the Lord. Every man that hath this gift bestowed, purifieth himself even as He is pure. He that brings to us the gift of regeneration, by which we receive the new nature which is free from sin, calls to each of us as He presents to us the basin with the cleansing water, Wash you, make you clean; put away the evil of your doings; ... cease to do evil, learn to do well. What God hath joined together let not man put asunder, viz. the act of faith by which we receive, the act of diligence by which we use, the purifying power.

**II. Note how the pure heart sees God.**

One is tempted to plunge into mystical depths when speaking upon such a text as this, but I wish to resist the temptation now, and to deal with it in a plain, practical fashion. Of course I need not remind you, or do more than simply remind you, that the matter in question here is no perception by sense of Him who is invisible, nor is it, either, an adequate and direct knowledge and comprehension of Him who is infinite, and whom a man can no more comprehend than he can stretch his short arms round the flaming orb of the central sun. But still, there is a relation to God possible for sinful men when they have been purified through the faith that is in Jesus Christ, which is so direct, so immediate, that it deserves the name of vision; and which, as I believe, is the ground of a firmer certitude, and of a no less clear apprehension, than is the sense from which the name is borrowed. For the illusions of sense have no place in the sight which the pure heart has of its Father, God.

Only, remember that here, and in the interpretation of all such Scriptural words, we have ever to be guided and governed by the great principle which our Lord laid down, under very solemn circumstances, when He said: He that hath seen Me hath seen the Father. Jesus Christ, whose name from eternity is the Word, is, from eternity to eternity, that which the name indicates--viz. the revealing activity of the eternal God. And, as I believe, wherever there have been kindled in men's hearts, either by the contemplation of nature and providence, or by the intuitions of their own spirits, any glints or glimpses of a God, there has been the operation of the Light that lighteth every man that cometh into the world. And far beyond the limits of historical Revelation within Israel, as recorded in Scripture, that Eternal Word has been unveiling, as men's dim eyes were capable of perceiving it, the light of the knowledge of the glory of God. But for us who stand in the full blaze of that historical manifestation in the character and work of Jesus Christ our Saviour, our vision of God is neither more nor less than the apprehension and the realisation of Christ as God manifest in the flesh.

Whether you call it the vision of God, or whether you call it communion with God in Jesus Christ, or whether you fall back upon the other metaphor of God dwelling in us and we dwelling in God, it all comes to the same thing, the consciousness of His presence, the realisation of His character, the blessed assurance of loving relations with Him, and the communion in mind, heart, will, and conduct, with God who has come near to us all in Jesus Christ.

Now, I need not remind you, I suppose, that for such a realisation and active, real communion, purity of heart is indispensable. That is no arbitrary requirement, but inherent, as we all know, in the very nature of the case. If we think of what He is, we shall feel that only the pure in heart can really pass into loving fellowship with Him. How can two walk together except they be agreed? And if we reflect upon the history of our own feelings and realisation of God's presence with us, we shall see that impurity always drew a membrane over the eye of our souls, or cast a mist of invisibility over the heavens. The smallest sin hides God from us. A very, very little grain of dye stuff will darken miles of a river, and make it incapable of reflecting the blue sky and the sparkling stars. The least evil done and loved blurs and blots, if it does not eclipse, for us the doers the very Sun of Righteousness Himself. No sinful men can walk in the midst of that fiery furnace and not be consumed. The pure in heart--and only they--shall see God.

Nor need I remind you, I suppose, that in this, as in all these Beatitudes, the germinal fulfilment in the present life is not to be parted off by a great gap from the perfect fulfilment in the life which is to come. And so I do not dwell so much on the differences, great and wonderful as these must necessarily be, between the manner of apprehension and communion with God which it is reserved for heaven to bestow upon us, and the manner of those which we may enjoy here; but I rather would point to the blessed thought that in essence they are one, however in degree they may be different. No doubt, changed circumstances, new capacities, the withdrawal of time and sense, the dropping away of the veil of flesh, which is the barrier between us and the unseen order of things in which we live and move and have our being, will induce changes and progresses in the manner and in the degree of that vision about which it would be folly for us to speak. If there were anything here with which we could compare the state of the blessed in heaven, in so far as it differs from their state on earth, we could form some conception of these differences; but if there were anything here with which we could compare it, it would be less glorious than it is. It is well that we should have to say, Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things that God hath prepared. So let us be thankful that it doth not yet appear what we shall be; and let us never allow our ignorance of the manner to make us doubt or neglect the fact, seeing that we know that when He shall appear ... we shall see Him as He is.

**III. Lastly, notice how this sight brings blessedness.**

There is nothing else that will satisfy the eye with seeing. The vision of God, even in that incipient and imperfect form which is possible upon earth, is the one thing that will calm our distractions, that will supply our needs, that will lift our lives to a level of serene power and blessedness, unattainable by any other way. Such a sight will dim all the dazzling illusions of earth, as, when the sun leaps into the heavens, the stars hide their faces and faint into invisibility. It will make us lords of ourselves, masters of the world, kings over time and sense and the universe. Everything will be different when earth is crammed with heaven, and every common bush afire with God. That is what is possible for a Christian holding fast by Jesus Christ, and in Him having communion with the Father and the Holy Spirit.

Brethren, I venture to say no word about the blessedness of that future. Heaven's golden gates keep their secret well. Even the purest joys of earth, about which poets have sung for untold centuries, after all singing need to be tasted before they are conceived of; and all our imaginings about the blessedness yonder is but like what a chrysalis might dream in its tomb as to the life of the radiant winged creature which it would one day become. Let us be content to be ignorant, and believe with confidence that we shall find that the vision of God is the heaven of heavens.

We shall owe that eternal vision to the eternal Revealer; for, as I believe, Scripture teaches us that it is only in Him that the glorified saints see the Father, as it is only in Him that here on earth we have the vision of God. That sight is not, like the bodily sense to which it is compared, a far-off perception of an ungrasped brightness, but it is the actual possession of what we behold. We see God when we have God. When we have God we have enough.

But I dare not close without one other word. There is a vision of God possible to an impure heart, in which there is no blessedness. There comes a day in which they shall call upon the rocks to fall and cover them from the face of Him that sits upon the throne. The alternative is before each of us, dear friends--either every eye shall see Him, and they also which pierced Him; and all kindreds of the earth shall wail because of Him; or, I shall behold Thy face in righteousness. I shall be satisfied, when I awake, with Thy likeness. If we cry, Create a clean heart in me, O God! He will answer, I will give you a new heart, and take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you a heart of flesh, and I will pour clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean.