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

**MATTHEW-021. THE EIGHTH BEATITUDE by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."*

*Matthew 5:10*

We have seen the description of the true subjects of the kingdom growing into form and completeness before our eyes in the preceding verses, which tell us what they are in their own consciousness, what they are in their longings, what they become in inward nature by God's gift of purity, how they move among men as angels of God, meek, merciful, peace-bringing. Is anything more needed for complete portraiture, any added touch to the picture? Yes--what the world is to them, what are its wages for such work, what its perception of such characters. Their relations to it are those of peace-bringers, reconcilers; its to them are those of hostility and dislike. Blessed are the persecuted for righteousness sake.

I take these words to be as universal and permanent in their application as any which have preceded them. This characteristic is, like all the others, the result of those which go before it and presupposes their continuous operation. The benediction which is attached is not an arbitrary promise, but stands in as close a relation of consequence to the characteristic as do the others. And it is marked out as the last in the series by being a repetition of the first, to express the idea of completeness, a rounded whole; to suggest that all the others are but elements of this, and that the initial blessing given to the poor in spirit is identical with that which is the reward of the highest Christian character, the one possessing implicitly what the other has in full development.

**I. The world's recompense to the peace-bringers.**

It may be thought that this clause, at all events, has reference to special epochs only, and especially to the first founding of Christianity. Such a reference, of course, there is. And very remarkable is it how clearly and honestly Christ always warned would-be disciples of what they would earn in this world by following Him.

But He seems to take especial pains to show that He here proclaims a principle of equal generality with the others, by separating the application of it to His immediate hearers which follows in the next verse, from the universal statement in the text. Their individual experience was but to illustrate the general rule, not to exhaust it. And you remember how frequently the same thought is set forth in Scripture in the most perfectly general terms.

**(a)** Notice that antagonism is inevitable between a true Christian and the world.

Take the character as it is sketched in verses preceding. Point by point it is alien from the sympathies and habits of irreligious men. The principles are different, the practices are different.

A true Christian ought to be a standing rebuke to the world, an incarnate conscience.

There are but two ways of ending that antagonism: either by bringing the world up to Christian character, or letting Christian character down to the world.

**(b)** The certain and uniform result is opposition and dislike--persecution in its reality.

Darkness hateth light.

Some will, no doubt, be touched; there is that in all men which acknowledges how awful goodness is. But the loftier character is not loved by the lower which if loves.

Aristides the Just. Christ Himself.

As to practice--a righteous life will not make a man popular. And as for opinions--earnest religious opinions of any sort are distasteful. Not the profession of them, but the reality of them--especially those which seem in any way new or strange--make the average man angrily intolerant of an earnest Christianity which takes its creed seriously and insists on testing conventional life by it. Indolence, self-complacency, and inborn conservatism join forces in resenting the presence of such inconvenient enthusiasts, who upset everything and want to turn the world upside down.

The moping owl doth to the moon complain

Of such as, wandering near her ivy tower.

Molest her ancient, solitary reign.

The seeds of the persecuting temper are in human nature, and they germinate in the storms which Christianity brings with it.

**(c)** The phases vary according to circumstances.

* We have not to look for the more severe and gross kinds of persecution.
* The tendency of the age is to visit no man with penalties for his belief, but to allow the utmost freedom of thought.
* The effect of Christianity upon popular morality has been to bring men up towards the standard of Christ's righteousness.
* The long proclamation of Christian truth in England has the effect of making mere profession of it a perfectly safe and even proper thing.
* But the antagonism remains at bottom the same.

Let a man earnestly accept even the creeds of established religion and live by them, and he will find that out. Let him seek to proclaim and enforce some of those truths of Christianity whose bearing upon social and economical and ecclesiastical questions is but partially understood. Let him set up and stick to a high standard of Christian morality and see what comes of it, in business, say, or in social life.

All that will live godly will suffer persecution.

**(d)** The present forms are perhaps not less hard to bear than the old ones.

They are, no doubt, very small in contrast with the lions in the arena or the fires of Smithfield. The curled lip, the civil scorn, the alienation of some whose good opinion we would fain have, or, if we stand in some public position, the poisonous slanders of the press, and the contumacious epithets, are trivial but very real tokens of dislike. We have the assassin's tongue instead of the assassin's dagger. But yet such things may call for as much heroism as braving a rack, and the spirit that shoots out the tongue may be as bad as the spirit that yelled, Christianos ad leones. 5. The great reason why professing Christians now know so little about persecution is because there is so little real antagonism. If ye were of the world, the world would love his own. The Church has leavened the world, but the world has also leavened the Church; and it seems agreed by common consent that there is to be no fanatical goodness of the early primitive pattern. Of course, then, there will be no persecution, where religion goes in silver slippers, and you find Christian men running neck and neck with others, and no man can tell which is which.

Then, again, many escape by avoiding plain Christian duty, shutting themselves up in their own little cities.

* Let us be sure that we never flinch from our Christian character to buy anybody's good opinion. It is not for us to lower our flags to whoever fires across our bows. Do you never feel it an effort to avow your principles? Do you never feel that they are being smiled away in society? Are you not flattered by being shown that this religion of yours is the one thing that stands between you and cordial reception by these people?
* Let us be sure that it is righteousness and Christ which are the grounds of anything of the sort we have to bear, and not our own faults of temper and character.
* Let us be sure that we are not persecutors our selves. To be so is inherent in human nature.

Men have often been both confessors and inquisitors. The spirit of censorious judgment, of fierce hate, of impatient intolerance, has often disgraced Christian men. It is for us to be only and always meek, merciful peace-bringers; and if men will not accept truth, to seek to win and woo them, not to be angry.

It is very hard to be both firm and tolerant, not letting the foolish heart expand into a lazy glow of benevolence to all beliefs, and so perilling one's own, nor letting intense adherence to our own convictions darken into impotent wrath against their harshest opponents. But let us remember that as God is our great example of mercy, so Christ is our great example of patience, both under the world's unbelief and the world's persecution.

**II. God's Gift to the persecuted.**

The kingdom of heaven.

This last promise is the same as the first--to express completeness, a rounded whole. All the others are but elements of this.

That highest reward given to the perfectest saint is but the fuller possession of what is given in germ to the humblest and sinfullest at the very first. The poor in spirit gets it at the beginning.

It is not implied by this promise that a Christian man's blessedness depends on the accident of some other person's behaviour to him, or that martyrs have a place which none others can reach. But theirs is the kingdom of heaven as a natural result of the character which brings about persecution, and as a natural result of the development of that character which persecution brings about. This promise, like all the others, has its twofold fulfilment.

There is a present recompense.

Persecution is the result of a character which brings Christians into the kingdom. Theirs is the kingdom--they are subjects. To them it is given to enter.

Persecution makes the present consciousness of the possession of the kingdom more vivid and joyous. It brings the enforced sense of a vocation separate from the hostile world's. As Thomas Fuller puts it somewhere, in troublous times the Church builds high, just as the men do in cities where there is little room to expand on the ground level.

Persecution brightens and solidifies hope, and thus may become infinitely sweet and blessed. How often it has been given to the martyr, as it was given to Stephen, to see heaven opened and Jesus standing at the right hand of God, as if risen to His feet to uphold as well as to receive His servant. Paul and Silas made the prison walls ring with their praises, though their backs were livid with wales and stained with blood. And we, in our far smaller trials for Christ's sake, may have the same more conscious possession of the kingdom and brightened hope of yet fuller possession of it.

There is a future recompense in the perfect kingdom, where men are rewarded according to their capacities. And if the way in which we have met the world's evil has been right, then that will have made us fit for a fuller possession.

In closing we recur to the thought of all these Beatitudes as a chain and the beginning of all as being penitence and faith.

Many a poor man, or many a little child, may have a higher place in heaven than some who have died at the stake for their Lord, for not our history, but our character, determines our place there, and all the fulness of the kingdom belongs to every one who with penitent heart comes to God in Christ, and then by slow degrees from that root brings forth first the blade, then the ear, then the full corn in the ear.

Here is Jesus ideal of character--poor in spirit, mourning, meek, hungering and thirsting after righteousness, merciful, pure in heart, peacemakers, persecuted for righteousness sake. To be these is to be blessed. And here is Jesus ideal of what, over and above the inherent blessedness of such a character, constitutes the true blessedness of a soul--the possession of the kingdom of heaven, comfort from God, the inheritance of the earth of which the inheritor may not own a yard, full satisfaction of the longing after righteousness, the obtaining of mercy from God, the name of sons of God, and, last as first, the possession of the kingdom of heaven. Is Jesus ideal yours? Do you believe that such a character is the highest that a man can attain, that in itself it is truly blessed, and will bring about results in contrast with which all baser-born joys are coarse and false? Happy will you be if you so believe, and if so believing you make the ideal which He paints your aim, and therefore secure the blessedness which He attaches to it as your exceeding great reward.