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

**MATTHEW-024. THE NEW FORM OF THE OLD LAW by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"17. Think not that I am come to destroy the law or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil. 18. For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled. 19. Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach them, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. 20. For I say unto you, That except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven. 21. Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not kill; and whosoever shall kill shall be in danger of the judgment: 22. But I say unto you, That whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment; and whosoever shall say to his brother, Raca, shall be in danger of the council; but whosoever shall say, Thou fool, shall be in danger of hell-fire. 23. Therefore, if thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath ought against thee; 24. Leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift. 25. Agree with thine adversary quickly, whiles thou art in the way with him; lest at any time the adversary deliver thee to the judge, and the judge deliver thee to the officer, and thou be cast into prison. 26. Verily I say unto thee, Thou shalt by no means come out thence, till thou hast paid the uttermost farthing."*

*Matthew 5:17-26*

latter, from verse 21 to the end. In the former, the King of the true kingdom lays down the general principles of the relation between its laws and the earlier revelation of the divine will; in the latter, He exemplifies this relation in one case, which is followed, in the remainder of the chapter, by three other illustrative examples.

**I. The King laying down the law of His kingdom in its relation to the older law of God.**

The four verses included in this section give a regular sequence of thought: verse 17 declaring our Lord's personal relation to the former revelation as fulfilling it; verse 18 basing that statement of the purpose of His coming on the essential permanence of the old law; verses 19 and 20 deducing thence the relation of His disciples to that law, and that in such a way that verse 19 corresponds to verse 18, and affirms that this permanent law is binding in its minutest details on His subjects, while verse 20 corresponds to verse 17, and requires their deepened righteousness as answering to His fulfilment of the law.

The first thing that strikes one in looking at these verses is their authoritative tone. There may, even thus early in Christ's career, have been some murmurs that He was taking up a position of antagonism to Mosaism, which may account for the think not which introduces the section. But however that may be, the swift transition from the Beatitudes to speak of Himself and of the meaning of His work is all of a piece with His whole manner; for certainly never did religious teacher open his mouth, who spoke so perpetually about Himself as did the meek Jesus. I came declares that He is the coming One, and is really a claim to have voluntarily appeared among men, as well as to be the long-expected Messiah. With absolute decisiveness He states the purpose of His coming. He knows the meaning of His own work, which so few of us do, and it is safe to take His own account of what He intends, as it so seldom is. His opening declaration is singularly composed of blended humility and majesty. Its humility lies in His placing Himself, as it were, in line with previous messengers, and representing Himself as carrying on the sequence of divine revelation. It would not have been humble for anybody but Him to say that, but it was so for Him. Its majesty lies in His claim to fulfil all former utterances from God. His fulfilment of the law properly so called is twofold: first, in His own proper person and life, He completes obedience to it, realises its ideal; second, in His exposition of it, both by lip and life, He deepens and intensifies its meaning, changing it from a letter which regulates the actions, to a spirit which moves the inward man.

So these first words point to the peculiarity of His coming as being His own act, and make two daring assertions, as to His character, which He claims to be sinless, and as to His teaching, which he claims to be an advance upon all the former divine revelation. As to the former, He speaks here as He did to John, thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness. No trace of consciousness of sin or defect appears in any words or acts of His. The calmest conviction that He was perfectly righteous is always manifest. How comes it that we are not repelled by such a tone? We do not usually admire self-complacent religious teachers. Why has nobody ever given Christ the lie, or pointed to His unconsciousness of faults as itself the gravest fault? Strange inaugural discourse for a humble sage and saint to assert his own immaculate perfection, stranger still that a listening world has said, Amen! Note, too, the royal style here. In this part of the Sermon our Lord twice uses the phrase, I say unto you, which He once introduces with His characteristic verily. Once He employs it to give solemnity to the asseveration which stretches forward to the end of this solid-seeming world, and once He introduces by it the stringent demand for His followers loftier righteousness. His unsupported word is given us as our surest light in the dark future, His bare command as the most imperative authority. This style goes kingly; it calls for absolute credence and unhesitating submission. When He speaks, even if we have nothing but His word, it is ours neither to make reply nor to reason why, but simply to believe, and swiftly to do. Rabbis might split hairs and quote other rabbis by the hour; philosophers may argue and base their teachings on elaborate demonstrations; moralists may seek to sway the conscience through reason; legislators to appeal to fear and hope. He speaks, and it is done; He commands, and it stands fast. There is nothing else in the world the least like the superb and mysterious authority with which He fronts the world, and, as Fountain of knowledge and Source of obligation, summons us all to submit and believe, by that Verily, I say unto you.

Verse 18. Next we have to notice the exuberant testimony to the permanence of the law. Not the smallest of its letters, not even the little marks which distinguished some of them, or the flourishes at the top of some of them, should pass,--as we might say, not even the stroke across a written t, which shows that it is not l. The law shall last as long as the world. It shall last till it be accomplished. And what then? The righteousness which it requires can never be so realised that we shall not need to realise it any more, and in the new heavens righteousness dwelleth. But in a very real sense law shall cease when fulfilled. There is no law to him who can say, Thy law is within my heart. When law has become both law and impulse, it has ceased to be law, in so far as it no longer stands over against the doer as an external constraint.

Verse 19. On this permanence of the law Christ builds its imperative authority in His kingdom. Obviously, the kingdom of heaven in verse 19 means the earthly form of that kingdom. The King republishes, as it were, the old code, and adopts it as the basis of His law. He thus assumes the absolute right of determining precedence and dignity in that kingdom. The sovereign is the fountain of honour, whose word ennobles. Observe the merciful accuracy of the language. The breach of the commandments either in theory or in practice does not exclude from the kingdom, for it is, while realised on earth, a kingdom of sinful men aiming after holiness; but the smallest deflection from the law of right, in theory or in practice, does lower a man's standing therein, inasmuch as it makes him less capable of that conformity to the King, and consequent nearness to Him, which determines greatness and smallness there. Dignity in the kingdom depends on Christ-likeness, and Christ-likeness depends on fulfilling, as He did, all righteousness. Small flaws are most dangerous because least noticeable. More Christian men lose their chance of promotion in the kingdom by a multitude of little sins than by single great ones.

Verse 20. As the King has Himself by His perfect obedience fulfilled the law, His subjects likewise must, in their obedience, transcend the righteousness of those who best knew and most punctiliously kept it. The scribes and Pharisees are not here regarded as hypocrites, but taken as types of the highest conformity with the law which the old dispensation afforded. The new kingdom demands a higher, namely a more spiritual and inward righteousness, one corresponding to the profounder meaning which the King gives to the old commandment. And this loftier fulfilment is not merely the condition of dignity in, but of entrance at all into, the kingdom. Inward holiness is the essence of the character of all its subjects. How that holiness is to be ours is not here told, except in so far as it is hinted by the fact that it is regarded as the issue of the King's fulfilling the law. These last words would have been terrible and excluding if they had stood alone. When they follow I am come to fulfil, they are a veiled gospel, implying that by His fulfilment the righteousness of the law is fulfilled in us.

**II. We have an illustrative example in the case of the old commandment against murder.**

This part of the passage falls into three divisions--each occupying two verses. First we have the deepening and expansion of the commandment. This part begins with the royal style again. What was said to them of old is left in its full authority. But I say unto you represents Jesus as possessing co-ordinate authority with that law, of which the speaker is unnamed, perhaps because the same Word of God which now spoke in Him had spoken it. We need but refer here to the Jewish courts and Sanhedrim, and to that valley of Hinnom, where the offal of Jerusalem and the corpses of criminals were burned, nor need we discuss the precise force of Raca and thou fool. The main points to be observed are, the distinct extension of the conception of killing to embrace malevolent anger, whether it find vent or is kept close in the heart; the clear recognition that, whilst the emotion which is the source of the overt act is of the same nature as the act, and that therefore he who hateth his brother is a murderer, there are degrees in criminality, according as the anger remains unexpressed, or finds utterance in more or less bitter and contemptuous language; that consequently there are degrees in the severity of the punishment which is administered by no earthly tribunal; and that, finally, this stern sentence has hidden in it the possibility of forgiveness, inasmuch as the consequence of the sin is liability to punishment, but not necessarily suffering of it. The old law had no such mitigation of its sentence.

Verses 23, 24. The second part of this illustrative example intensifies the command by putting obedience to it before acts of external worship. The language is vividly picturesque. We see a worshipper standing at the very altar while the priest is offering his sacrifice. In that sacred moment, while he is confessing his sins, a flash across his memory shows him a brother offended,--rightly or wrongly it matters not. The solemn sacrifice is to pause while he seeks the offended one, and, whatever the other man's reception of his advances may be, he cleanses his own bosom of its perilous stuff; then he may come back and go on with the interrupted worship. Nothing could put in a clearer light the prime importance of the command than this setting aside of sacred religious acts for its sake. Obedience is better than sacrifice. And the little word therefore, at the beginning of verse 23, points to the terrible penalties as the reason for this urgency. If such destruction may light on the angry man, nothing should come between him and the conquest of his anger. Such self-conquest, which will often seem like degradation, is more acceptable service to the King, and truer worship, than all words or ceremonial acts. Deep truths as to the relations between worship, strictly so called, and life, lie in these words, which may well be taken to heart by those whose altar is Calvary, and their gift the thank-offering of themselves.

Verses 25, 26. The third part is a further exhortation to the same swiftness in casting out anger from the heart, thrown into a parabolic form. When you quarrel with a man, says Christ in effect, prudence enjoins to make it up as soon as possible, before he sets the law in motion. If once he, as plaintiff, has brought you before the judge, the law will go on mechanically through the stages of trial, condemnation, surrender to the prison authorities, and confinement till the last farthing has been paid. So, if you are conscious that you have an adversary,--and any man that you hate is your adversary, for he will appear against you at that solemn judgment to come,--agree with him, put away the anger out of your heart at once. In the special case in hand, the adversary is the man with whom we are angry. In the general application of the precept to the whole series of offences against the law, the adversary may be regarded as the law itself. In either interpretation, the stages of appearing before the judge and so on up till the shutting up in prison are the stages of the judgment before the tribunal, not of earth, but of the kingdom of heaven. They point to the same dread realities as are presented in the previous verses under the imagery of the Jewish courts and the foul fires of the valley of Hinnom. Christ closes the grave parable with His solemn Verily I say unto thee--as looking on the future judgment, and telling us what His eyes saw. The words have no bearing on the question of the duration of the imprisonment, for He does not tell us whether the last farthing could ever be paid or not; but they do teach this lesson, that, if once we fall under the punishments of the kingdom, there is no end to them until the last tittle of the consequences of our breach of its law has been paid. To delay obedience, and still more to delay abandoning disobedience, is madness, in view of the storm that may at any moment burst on the heads of the rebels.

Thus He deepens and fulfils one precept of the old law by extending the sweep of its prohibition from acts to thoughts, by setting obedience to it above sacrifice and worship, and by picturing in solemn tones of parabolic warning the consequences of having the disobeyed precept as our unreconciled adversary. In this one case we have a specimen of His mode of dealing with the whole law, every jot of which He expanded in His teaching, and perfectly observed in His life.

A gospel is hidden even in these warnings, for it is distinctly taught that the offended law may cease to be our adversary, and that we may be reconciled with it, ere yet it has accused us to the judge. It was not yet time to proclaim that the King fulfilled the law, not only by life, but by death, and that therefore all His believing subjects are justified from all things, from which ye could not be justified by the law, as well as endowed with the righteousness by which they fulfil that law in deeper reality, and fairer completeness, than did those of old time, who loved it most.