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

**MATTHEW-028. TRUMPETS AND STREET CORNERS by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"1. Take heed that ye do not your alms before men, to be seen of them: otherwise ye have no reward of your Father which is in heaven. 2. Therefore, when thou doest thine alms, do not sound a trumpet before thee, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues, and in the streets, that they may have glory of men. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward. 3. But when thou doest alms, let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth; 4. That thine alms may be in secret: and thy Father, which seeth in secret, Himself shall reward thee openly. 5. And when thou prayest, thou shalt not be as the hypocrites are: for they love to pray standing in the synagogues, and in the corners of the streets, that they may be seen of men. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward."*

*Matthew 6:1-5*

Our Lord follows His exposition of the deepened sense which the old law assumes in His kingdom, by a warning against the most subtle foes of true righteousness. He first gives the warning in general terms in verse 1, and then flashes its light into three dark corners, and shows how hankering after men's praise corrupts the beneficence which is our duty to our neighbour, the devotion which is our duty to God, and the abstinence which is our duty to ourselves. We deal now with the two former.

We have first the general warning, given out like the text of a sermon, or the musical phrase which underlies the various harmonies of some concerto. The first word implies that the evil is a subtle and seducing one. Take heed as of something which may steal into and mar the noblest lives. The serpent lies coiled under the leaves, and may sting and poison the unwary hand. The generality of the warning, and the logical propriety of the whole section, require the adoption of the reading of the Revised Version, namely, righteousness. The thing to be taken heed of is not the doing it before men, which will often be obligatory, often necessary, and never in itself wrong, but the doing it to be seen of them. Not the number of spectators, but the furtive glance of our eyes to see if they are looking at us, makes the sin. We are to let our good works shine, that men may glorify our Father. Pious souls are to shine, and yet to be hid,--a paradox which can be easily solved by the obedient. If our motive is to make God's glory more visible, we shall not be seeking to be ourselves admired. The harp-string's swift vibrations, as it gives out its note, make it unseen.

The reason for the warning goes on two principles: one that righteousness is to be rewarded, over and above its own inherent blessedness; another, that the prospect of the reward is a legitimate stimulus, over and above the prime reason for righteousness, namely, that it is righteous. The New Testament morality is not good enough for some very superfine people, who are pleased to call it selfish because it lets a martyr brace himself in the fire by the vision of the crown athwart the smoke. Somehow or other, however, that selfish morality gets itself put in practice, and turns out more unselfish people than its assailants manage to produce. Perhaps the motive which they attack may be part of the reason.

The mingling of regard for man's approbation with apparently righteous acts absolutely disqualifies them for receiving God's reward, for it changes their whole character, and they are no longer what they seem. Charity given from that motive is not charity, nor prayer offered from it devotion.

**I. The general warning is applied to three cases, of which we have to deal with two.**

Our Lord speaks first of ostentatious almsgiving. Note that we are not to take blowing the trumpets as actual fact. Nobody would do that in a synagogue. The meaning of all attempts, however concealed, to draw attention to one's beneficence, is just what the ear-splitting blast would be; and the incongruity of startling the worshippers with the harsh notes is like the incongruity of doing good and trying to attract notice. I think Christ's ear catches the screech of the brazen abomination in a good many of the ways of raising and giving money, which find favour in the Church to-day. This is an advertising age, and flowers that used to blush unseen are forced now under glass for exhibition. No one needs to blow his own trumpet nowadays. We have improved on the ruder methods of the Pharisees, and newspapers and collectors will blow lustily and loud for us, and defend the noise on the ground that a good example stimulates others. Perhaps so, though it may be a question what it stimulates to, and whether B's gift, drawn from him in imitation or emulation of A's, is any liker Christ's idea of gifts than was A's, given that B might hear of it. To a very large extent, the money getting and giving arrangements of the modern Church are neither more nor less than the attempt to draw Christ's chariot with the devil's traces. Christ condemned ostentation. His followers too often try to make use of it. They have their reward. Observe that have means have received in full, and note the emphasis of that their. It is all the reward that they will ever get, and all that they are capable of. The pure and lasting crown, which is a fuller possession of God Himself, has no charms for them, and could not be given. And what a poor thing it is which they seek--the praise of men, a breath, as unsubstantial and short-lived as the blast of the trumpet which they blew before their selfish benevolence. Their charity was no charity, for what they did was not to give, but to buy. Their gift was a speculation. They invested in charity, and looked for a profit of praise. How can they get God's reward? True benevolence will even hide the giving right hand from the idle left, and, as far as may be, will dismiss the deed from the doer's consciousness. Such alms, given wholly out of pity and desire to be like the all-giving Father, can be rewarded, and will be, with that richer acquaintance with Him and more complete victory over self, which is the heaven of heaven and the foretaste of it now.

In its coarsest forms, this ostentation is out and out hypocrisy, which consciously assumes a virtue which it has not. But far more common and dangerous is the subtle, unconscious mingling of it with real charity--the eye wandering from the poor, whom the hand is helping, to the bystanders--and it is this mingling which we have therefore to take most heed to avoid. One drop of this sour stuff will curdle whole gallons of the milk of human kindness. The hypocrisy which hoodwinks ourselves is more common and perilous than that which blinds others.

**II. We need not dwell at length on the second application of the general warning--to prayer; as the words are almost, and the thoughts entirely, identical with those of the former verses.**

If there be any action of the spirit which requires the complete exclusion of thoughts of men, it is prayer, which is the communion of the soul alone with God. It is as impossible to pray, and at the same time to think of men, as to look up and down at once. If we think of prayer, as formalists in all times have done, as so many words, then it will not seem incongruous to choose the places where men are thickest for saying our prayers, and we shall do it with all the more spirit if we have spectators. That accounts for a great deal of the devotion in Mohammedan and Roman Catholic countries which travellers with no love for Protestant Christianity are so fond of praising. But if we think of prayer as Christ did, as being the yearning of the soul to God, we shall feel that the inmost chamber and the closed door are its fitting accompaniments. Of course, our Lord is not forbidding united prayer; for each of the assembled worshippers may be holding communion with God, which is none the less solitary though shared by others, and none the less united though in it each is alone with God.

III. Our Lord passes for a time from the more immediate subject of ostentation to add other teaching about prayer, which still farther unfolds its true conception. Another corruption arising from the error of thinking that prayer is an outward act, is vain repetition, characteristic of all heathen religion, and resting upon a profound disbelief in the loving willingness of God to help. Of course, earnest, reiterated prayer is not vain repetition. Jesus is not here condemning His own agony in Gethsemane when He thrice said the same words. The persistence in prayer, which is the child of faith, is no relation to the parrot-like repetition which is the child of disbelief, nor does the condemnation of the one touch the other. The frenzied priests who yelled, O Baal, hear us! all the long day; the Buddhists who repeat the sacred invocation till they are stupefied; the poor devotee who thinks merit is proportioned to the number of Paternosters and Aves, are all instances of this gross mechanical conception of prayer. Are there no similar superstitions nearer home? Are there no ministers or congregations that we ever heard of, who have a regulation length for their prayers, and would scarcely think they had prayed at all if their devotions were as short as most of the prayers in the Bible? Are we in no danger of believing what Christ here tells us is pure heathenism--that many words may move God?

The only real remedy against such degradation of the very idea of prayer lies in the deeper conceptions of God and of it which Christ here gives. He knows our needs before we ask. Then what is prayer for? Not to inform Him, nor to move Him, unwilling, to have mercy, as if, like some proud prince, He required a certain amount of recognition of His greatness as the price of His favours, but to fit our own hearts by conscious need and true desire and dependence, to receive the gifts which He is ever willing to give, but we are not always fit to receive. As St. Augustine has it, the empty vessel is by prayer carried to the full fountain.