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

**MATTHEW-046. THE TWO PATHS by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"13. Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat: 14. Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it."*

*Matthew 7:13-14*

A frank statement of the hardships and difficulties involved in a course of conduct does not seem a very likely way to induce men to adopt it, but it often proves so. There is something in human nature which responds to the bracing tonic of the exhortation: By doing thus you will have to face many hardships and many difficulties which you may avoid by leaving it alone; but do it, because it is best in the long run, being right from the beginning. So the story of the martyrs fires has lighted many a man to the faith for which the martyr was burned. Many a youth has been led to take the shilling and enlist by reading accounts of wounds and battles and sufferings.

Our Lord will have no soldiers in His army on false pretences. They shall know exactly what they have to reckon on if they take service with Him. And thus, in the solemn and familiar words of my text, He enjoins each of us to become His disciples; and that not only because--as is sometimes supposed--of the blessing that lies at the end for His servants, but because of the very things on the road to the end which, at first sight, seemed difficulties. For you will observe that in my text the exhortation, Enter ye in at the strait gate, is followed by two clauses, each of which begins with a for; the one being a description of the road that is to be shunned; the other, an account of the path that is to be followed. In each description there are four contrasted particulars: the gate, strait or wide; the road, narrow or broad; the travellers, many or few; and the ends, life or destruction.

Now, people generally read these words as if our Lord was saying, Though the one path is narrow and rugged and steep and unfrequented, yet walk on it, because it leads to life; and though the other presents the opposite of all these characteristics, yet avoid it, because pleasant and popular as it is, its end is destruction. But that is not what He says. All four things are reasons for avoiding the one and following the other; which, being turned into plain English, is just this, that we ought to be Christian people precisely because there are difficulties and pains and sacrifices in being so, which we may ignobly shirk if we like. It is not, Though the road be narrow it leads to life, therefore enter it; but Because it is narrow, and leads to life, therefore blessed are the feet that are set upon it.

Let us, then, look at these four characteristics, and note how they all enforce the merciful summons which our Lord is addressing to each of us, as truly as He did to the hearers gathered around Him on the mountain: Enter ye in at the strait gate.

**I. The gates.**

The gate is in view here merely as a means of access to the road, and the metaphor simply comes to this, that it is more difficult to be a Christian man than not to be one, and therefore you ought to be one.

Now, what makes a Christian? We do not need to go further than this Sermon on the Mount for answer. The two first of our Lord's Beatitudes, as they are called, are Blessed are the poor in spirit, and Blessed are they that mourn. These two carry the conditions of entrance on the Christian life. There must be consciousness of our own emptiness, weakness, and need; there must be penitent recognition of our own ill-desert and lamentation over that. These two things, the consciousness of emptiness, and the sorrow for sin, make--I was going to say--the two door-posts of the narrow gate through which a man has to press. It is too narrow for any of his dignities or honours. A camel cannot go through the eye of a needle, not only because of its own bulk, but because of the burdens which flap on either side of it, and catch against the jambs. All my self-confidence, and reputation, and righteousness, will be rubbed off when I try to press through that narrow aperture. You may find on a lonely moor low, contracted openings that lead into tortuous passages--the approaches to some of the ancient Picts houses, where a feeble folk dwelt, and secured themselves from their enemies. The only way to get into them is to go down upon your knees; and the only way to get into this road--the way of righteousness--is by taking the same attitude. No man can enter unless--like that German Emperor whom a Pope kept standing in the snow for three days outside the gate of Canossa--he is stripped of everything, down to the hair-shirt of penitence. And that is not easy. Naaman wanted to be healed as a great man in the court of Damascus. He had to strip himself of his offices, and dignities, and pride, and to come down to the level of any other leper. You and I, dear brother, have to go through the same process of stripping ourselves of all the adventitious accretions that have clung to us, and to know ourselves naked and helpless, before we can pass through the gate.

Further, we have to go in one by one. Two cannot pass the turnstile at the same time. We have to enter singly, as we shall have to pass through the other dark gates, across the wild which no man knows, at the end of life.

Because it is strait, it is a great deal easier to stop outside, as so many of those to whom I speak are doing. For that, you have nothing to do but to drift and let things drift. No decision nor effort is needed; no coming out of yourselves. It is all as easy as it is for a wild animal to enter in between the broadly extending palisades that converge as they come nearer the trap, so that the creature is snared before he knows. The gate is wide: that is the sure condemnation of it. It is always easy to begin bad and unworthy things, of all sorts. And there is nothing easier than to keep in the negative position which so many of my audience, I fear me, are in, of not being a Christian.

But, on the other side, it is not so hard as it looks to go in, and it is not so easy as it seems to stop out. For there are two men in every man--a better and a worse; and what pleases the one disgusts the other. The choice which each of us has to make is whether we shall do the things that are easiest to our worst self, or those that are easiest to our best self. For in either case there will be difficulties; in either case there will be antagonisms.

But it is good for us to make the effort, apart altogether from the end. If there were no life eternal at the far end of the road which at this end has the narrow gate, it would contribute to all that is noblest and best in our characters, and to the repression of all that is ignoble and worst, that we should take that lowly position which Christ requires, and by the heroism of a self-abandoning faith, fling ourselves into His arms.

Remember, too, that the strait gate, by reason of its very straitness, is in the noblest sense wide. If there were anything else required of a man than simply self-distrust and reliance on Jesus Christ, then this great Gospel that I am feebly trying to preach would be a more sectional and narrower thing than it is. But its glory is that it requires nothing which any man is unable to bring, that it has no invitation for sections, classes, grades of culture or intelligence or morality, but that in its great cosmopolitanism and universality it comes to every man; because it treats all as on one level, and requires from each only what all can bring--knowledge of themselves as sinners, and humble trust in Jesus Christ as a Saviour. It is narrow because there is no room for sin or self-righteousness to go in; it is wide as the world, and, like the capacious portals of some vast cathedral, ample enough to receive without hustling, and to accommodate without inconvenience, every soul of man.

**II. Notice the contrast of the two roads, which, in like manner, points the exhortation to choose the better.**

The one is broad; the other is narrow. Which, being turned into plain English, is just this--that the Christian course has limitations which do not hamper the godless man; and that on the path of godlessness or Christlessness there is a deceptive appearance of freedom and independence which attracts many.

Narrow is the road. Yes, if you are to be a Christian, you must have your whole life concentrated on, and consecrated to, one thing; and, just as the vagrant rays of sunshine have to be collected into a focus before they burn, so the wandering manifoldnesses of our aims and purposes have all to be brought to a point, This one thing I do, and whatsoever we do we have to do it as in God, and for God, and by God, and with God. Therefore the road is narrow because, being directed to one aim, it has to exclude great tracts on either side, in which people that have a less absorbing and lofty purpose wander and expatiate at will. As on some narrow path in Eastern lands, with high, prickly-pear hedges on either side, and vineyards stretching beyond them, with luscious grapes in abundance, a traveller has to keep on the road, within the prickly fences, dusty though it may be, and though his thirsty lips may be cracking.

I remember once going to that strange island-fortress off the Normandy coast, which stands on an isolated rock in the midst of a wide bay. One narrow causeway leads across the sands. Does a traveller complain of having to keep it? It is safety and life, for on either side stretches the tremulous sand, on which, if a foot is planted, the pedestrian is engulfed. So the narrow way on which we have to journey is a highway cast up, on which no evil will befall us, while on each hand away out to the horizon lie the treacherous quicksands. Narrowness is sometimes safety. If the road is narrow it is the better guide, and they who travel along it travel safely. Restrictions and limitations are of the essence of all nobleness and virtue. So did not I because of the fear of the Lord.

Set side by side with that the competing path. Wide? Yes! Do as you like--that is sufficiently wide. And even where that gospel of the animal has not become the guide to a man, there are many occupations, pursuits, recreations which men who lack the supreme concentration and consecration that come through over mastering love to Jesus Christ who has redeemed them, may legitimately in their own estimation do, but which no Christian man should do.

But, as I said before about the gates, it is not so easy as it looks to walk the broad road, nor so hard as it seems to tread the narrow one. For her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace; and, on the other hand, licentiousness and liberty are not the same thing, and true freedom is not to do as you like, but to like to do as you ought. Besides, the path which looks attractive, and tempts to the indulgence of many appetites and habits which a Christian man must rigidly subdue, does not continue so attractive. Earthly pleasures have a strange knack of losing their charm, and, at the same time, increasing their hold, with familiarity. Many a man who has plunged into some kind of dissipation because of the titillation of his senses which he found in it, discovers that the titillation diminishes and the tyranny grows; and that when he thought that he had bought a joy, he has sold himself slave to a master.

So, dear friends, and especially you young people, let me beseech you to be suspicious of courses of conduct which come to you with the whisper, pleasant, sweet. If you have two things before you, one of which is easy and the other hard, ninety times out of a hundred it will be safe for you to choose the hard one, and the odd ten times it will be at least as well for you to choose it. Thus we travel to the stars. As one of our poets has it, the path of duty is the way of glory, and those that scorn delights and live laborious days, and listen not to the voices that say Come and enjoy this, but to the sterner voice that says Come and bear this--these will

Find the stubborn thistles bursting

Into glossy purples that outredden

All voluptuous garden roses.

So, because the road is narrow, therefore choose it. Because the other path is wide, I beseech you to avoid it.

**III. Note the travellers.**

On the one road there are few, on the other, by comparison, many. That was true in Christ's time, and although the world is better since, and many feet have trodden the narrow way, and have found that it leads to life, yet I am afraid it is so still.

Now, did you ever think, or do you believe, that the fact of a course of conduct, or of an opinion, being the conduct or the opinion of a majority, is pro tanto against it? What everybody says must be true, says the old proverb, and I do not dispute it. What most people say is, I think, most often false. And that is true about conduct, as well as about opinion. It is very unsafe to take the general sense of a community for your direction. It is unsafe in regard to matters of opinion, it is even more unsafe in regard to matters of conduct. That there are many on a road is no sign that the road is a right one; but it is rather an argument the other way; looking at the gregariousness of human nature, and how much people like to save themselves the trouble of thinking and decision, and to run in ruts; just as a cab-driver will get upon the tram-lines when he can, because his vehicle runs easier there. So the fact that, if you are going to be Christ-like Christians, you will be in the minority, is a reason for being such.

You young men in warehouses, and all of you in your different spheres and circles, do not be afraid of being singular. And remember that Jesus Christ, and one man with Him, though it is Athanasius contra mundum, are always in the majority.

Now that is good, bracing teaching, apart altogether from Christianity. But I wish to bring it to bear especially in that direction. And so I would remind you that after all, the solitude in which a man may have to walk, if he sets Christ before him, and tries to follow Him with His cross upon his shoulders, is only an apparent solitude. For, look, whose footsteps are these on my path, not without spots of blood, where the tender feet have trod upon thorns and briars? There has been Somebody here before me. Who? Let him take up his cross and follow Me. And if we follow Him, the solitude will be like that in which the two sad disciples walked on the Resurrection day, when a third came and joined Himself to them. So a second will come to each of us, if we are alone, and our hearts will burn within us. Nor shall we need to wait till the repose of the evening and the breaking of bread, before we know that it is the Lord; nor, known and recognised, will He vanish from our sides.

Dear brethren, because few there be that go in thereat, and walk thereon, I beseech you to go in through the door of faith, and to walk in the way of Christ, who has left us an ensample that we should follow in His steps. If of thee it can be said, as the great Puritan poet said of one virgin pure, that thou

Wisely hast shunned the broad way and the green,

And with those few art eminently seen

That labour up the hill of heavenly truth,--

his assurance to her will be applicable to thee, and

Thou, when the Bridegroom, with His feastful friends,

Passes to bliss at the mid-hour of night,

Hast gained thy entrance.

**IV. That leads me to the last point--viz. the contrasted ends of these two paths.**

Christ assumes the right to speak decisively and authoritatively with regard to the ultimate issues of human conduct, in a way which, as I believe, marks His divinity, and which no man can venture upon without presumption. Of the one path He declares without hesitation that it leads to life; of the other He affirms uncompromisingly that it leads to destruction. Now, I dare not dwell upon these solemn thoughts with any enfeebling expansion by my own words, but I beseech you to lay them to heart--only take the simple remark, as a commentary and an exposition of the solemn meaning of these issues, that life does not mean mere continuous existence, but, as it generally does upon His lips, means that which alone He recognises as being the true life of such a creature as man--viz. existence in union with Himself, the Source of life; and that, conversely, destruction does not mean merely the cessation of being, or what we call the destruction of consciousness and the annihilation of a soul, but that it means the continued consciousness of a soul rent away from Him in whom alone is life, and which therefore has made shipwreck of everything, and has destroyed itself.

There are the issues, then, before us, and I dare not blur the clear distinction which Jesus Christ draws. I listen to Him, and accept His word, and I press upon you, dear brethren, that the main thing about a road is, after all, where it leads us; and I ask you to remember that your life-path--as I try to remember that mine--is tending to one or other of these two issues. The one path may be, and is, rough and steep though its delights are nobler, more poignant, and more permanent than any that can be found elsewhere. Steadily climbing like some mountain railway, it reaches at last the short tunnel on the summit level, and then dashes out into the blinding blaze of a new sunshine. The other goes merrily enough, at first, downhill, but at last it comes to the edge of the abyss, and there it stops, but the traveller does not. He goes over; and nobody can see the darkness into which he falls.

Dear friends, Christ says, I am the Way. Do you go to Him and cry, See if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me into the way everlasting.