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

**MATTHEW-048. THE CHRIST OF THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"28.* *And it came to pass, when Jesus had ended these sayings, the people were astonished at His doctrine: 29. For He taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes."*

*Matthew 7:28-29*

It appears, then, from these words, that the first impression made on the masses by the Sermon on the Mount was not so much an appreciation of its high morality, as a feeling of the personal authority with which Christ spoke. Had the scribes, then, no authority? They ruled the whole life of the nation with tyrannical power. They sat in Moses seat, and claimed all manner of sway and control. And yet when people listened to Jesus, they heard something ringing in His voice that they missed in the rabbis. They only set themselves up, in their highest claims, as being commentators upon, and the expositors of, the Law. Their language was Moses commanded; Rabbi this said so-and-so; Rabbi that said such-and-such. But as even the crowd that listened to Him detected, Jesus Christ, in these great laws of His kingdom, adduced no authority but His own; stood forth as a Legislator, not as a commentator; and commanded, and prohibited, and repealed, and promised, on His own bare word. That is a characteristic of all Christ's teaching; and, as we see from my text, to the apprehension of the first auditors, it was deeply stamped on the Sermon on the Mount.

I purpose to turn to that Sermon now, and try if we can make out the points in it which impressed these people, who first heard it, with the sense that they were in the presence of an autocratic Voice that had a right to speak, and which did speak, with absolute and unexampled authority.

And I do that the more readily because I dare say you have all heard people that said Oh! I do not care about the dogmas of Christianity; give me the Sermon on the Mount and its sublime morality; that is Christianity enough for me. Well, I should be disposed to say so pretty nearly too, if you will take all the Sermon on the Mount, and not go picking and choosing bits out of it. For I am sure that if you will take the whole of its teaching you will find yourself next door to, if not in the very inmost chamber of, the mysticism of the Gospel of John and the theology of Paul.

**I. I ask you, then, to note that the Sermon claims for Jesus Christ the authority of supremacy above all former revelation and revealers.**

Think not, says He, that I am come to destroy the law or the prophets; I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil. And then He goes on, in five cases, to illustrate, in a very remarkable way, the authority that He claimed over the former Law, moulding it according to His will.

Now I do not propose to do more than suggest, in a sentence, two points that I think of importance. Observe that remarkable form of speech, I am come. May we not fairly say that it implies that He existed before birth, and that His appearance among men was the result of His own act? Does it not imply that He was not merely born, but came, choosing to be born just as He chose to die? In what sense can we understand the Apostle's view that it was an infinite and stupendous act of condescension in Christ to be found in fashion as a man, unless we believe that by His own will and act He came forth from the Father and entered into the world, just as by His own will and act He left the world and went unto the Father?

But I do not dwell upon that, nor upon another very important consideration. Why was it that Jesus Christ, at the very beginning of His mission, felt Himself bound to disclaim any intention of destroying the law or the prophets? Must not the people have begun to feel that there was something revolutionary and novel about His teaching, and that it was threatening to disturb what had been consecrated by ages? So that it was needful that He should begin His career with this disclaimer of the intention of destruction. Strange for a divine messenger, if He simply stood as one in the line and sequence of divine revelation, to begin His work by saying, Now, I do not mean to annihilate all that is behind Me! The question arises how anybody should have supposed that He did, and why it should ever have been needful for Him to say that He did not.

But I pass by all that, and ask you to think how much lies in these words of our Lord: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil. They imply a claim that His life was a complete embodiment of God's law. Here is a man beginning His ministry as a religious teacher, with the assertion, stupendous, and, upon any other lips but His, insane arrogance, that He had come to do everything which God demanded, and to set forth before the world a living Pattern of the whole obedience of a human nature to the whole law of God. Who is He that said that? And how do we account for the fact that nineteen centuries have passed, and, excepting in the case of here and there a bitter foe whose hostility had robbed him of his common sense, no lip has ventured to say that He claimed too much for Himself when He said, I am come to fulfil the law; or that He falsely read the facts of His own experience and consciousness when He declared, I have finished the work which Thou gavest Me to do.

Still further, here our Lord claims specifically and expressly to fulfil not only law but prophets. That is to say, He sets Himself forth as the Reality which had filled the imaginations and the hearts of a whole nation for centuries; as the living Reality which had been meant by all those lofty words of seers and prophets in the past. He declares that all those rapturous forecastings, all those dim anticipations, all those triumphant promises, were not left to swing in vacuo, or to float about unfulfilled, but that He stood there, the actual Realisation of them all; and in Him, wrapped up as in a seed, the Kingdom of Heaven was among men.

And still further, He claims not only personal purity and completeness, and the fulfilment of all prior and prophetic anticipation, but also He claims to have, and He exercises, the power of moulding, expanding, interpreting, and in some cases brushing aside, laws which He and they alike knew to be the laws of God. I do not need to specify in detail the instances which are contained in this Sermon on the Mount. But I simply ask you to consider the formula with which our Lord introduces each of His references to that subject. Ye have heard that it hath been said to them of old time so-and-so,--and then follows a command of the Mosaic law; but I say unto you so-and-so,--and then follows a deepening or a modification or a repeal, of statutes acknowledged by Him and His hearers to be divine. He certainly claims to speak with the same right and authority as the old Law did. He as certainly claims to speak with incomparably higher authority than Moses did, for the latter never professed to give precepts of his own. He was not the Lawgiver, as he is often called, but only the messenger of the Lawgiver. But Christ is Himself the fountain of the laws of His Kingdom. Nor only so, but He puts Himself without apology or explanation in front of Moses and asserts power to modify, to set aside, or to re-enact with new stringency, the precepts of the divine law.

One supposition alone accounts for Christ's attitude to law and prophets in this Sermon, and that is that the Eternal Wisdom and Personal Word of God, which at sundry times and in divers manners spake to the old world by Moses, itself at last, in human form and personal guise, came here on earth and spake to us men. It is the same Voice that breathed through the prophets of old, and that spake on the lips of the Christ of Nazareth; the same Eternal Word who manifested Himself in a fiery law on Sinai, and in words of no less majesty and of deepened gentleness, when He gathered the people round about Him, and said to them, It hath been said to them of old time, ... but I say unto you ... '

Here is the sum and climax of all revelation, the last word of the divine mind and will and heart, to the world. Moses and Elias stand beside Him on the Mount of Transfiguration, witnesses of His superiority and servants at His feet, and they vanish into mist and darkness, and leave there, erect, white-robed, solitary, the unique figure of the One Lawgiver and the perfect Revealer of God to men.

And this is the authority which struck even on the unsusceptible hearts of the listening crowds.

**II. Still further, let me ask you to consider how, in this same great Sermon, He claims the authority of One who is unique in His relation to the Father.**

You will find that in it there occurs very frequently the expression, your Father which is in Heaven; or sometimes with the variation, thy Father which is in Heaven, or, which seeth in secret. But you will also find that whilst our Lord speaks about My Father which is in Heaven, He never says our Father; excepting in the exception which proves the rule when He is putting into the lips of His disciples the great formula of prayer which we call the Lord's Prayer; and there speaking as through their consciousness, and teaching them their lesson, He says Our Father, not as if He Himself were praying, but as if He were telling them how to pray. But when He speaks out of His own consciousness He speaks of My Father and your Father, never of our Father.

And that corresponds with other phenomena in Scripture in our Lord's own language where you find that always He draws this broad distinction. He never associates Himself with us in His Sonship. He ever asserts that He is the Son of God. Even when He wishes to speak with the utmost tenderness, He bids the weeping Mary hear the message, I go unto My Father and your Father. This doctrine is thought by many to be one of those which they get rid of by professing the Christianity of the Sermon on the Mount. But it is there as plainly as in other parts of Scripture. If we accept all which it teaches, we cannot escape from the belief that He is the only begotten and well-beloved Son of the Father; and also that through Him and in Him we, too, may receive the adoption of sons.

Dear friends, I press this upon you as no mere piece of hard theological doctrine, but as containing in it the very essentials of all spiritual life for each of us, that all our spiritual life must come by participation in Christ, and that we enter into an altogether new and blessed relation to God when, laying our humble and penitent hands on the head of that dear Sacrifice that died on the Cross for as, we through Him cease to be children of wrath and become heirs of God. To as many as received Him, to them gave He authority to become the children of God, even to them that believe in His name, but His Sonship stands unique and unapproachable, though it is the foundation from which flows all the sonship of the whole family in heaven and in earth. Moses and the prophets, teachers and guides, Apostles and Helpers, they are all but the servants of the family; this is the Son through whom we receive the adoption of sons.

**III. We have in this great discourse the authority of One who is absolute Lord and Master over men.**

Not every one that saith unto me, Lord! Lord! shall enter into the Kingdom of Heaven. Many will say to Me in that day, Lord! Lord! have we not prophesied in Thy name, and in Thy name done many wonderful works? Whoso heareth these sayings of Mine, and doeth them, I will liken him to a wise man, which built his house upon a rock.

Jesus Christ here comes before the whole race, and claims an absolute submission. His word is to control, with authoritative and all-comprehensive scrutiny and power, every aim of our lives, and every action. In His name we may be strong, in His name we may cast out devils, in His name we may do many wonderful works. If we build upon Him we build upon a rock; if we build anywhere else we build upon the sand.

Strange, outrageous claims for a man to make! Give me the Sermon on the Mount, and keep your doctrinal theology, say people. But I want to know what kind of morality it is that is all traceable up to this--Do as I bid you, My will is your law; My smile is your reward; to obey Me is perfection. I think that takes you a good long way into theology. I think that the Man who said that--and you all know that He said it--must he either a good deal more or a good deal less than a perfect man. If He is only that He is not that; for if He is only that, He has no business to tell me to obey Him. He has no business to substitute His will for every other law; and you have no business--and it will be at the peril of your manhood if you do--to take any man, the Man Christ or any other, as an absolute example and pattern and master.

My brethren, Christ's claim to absolute obedience rests upon His divine nature and on His redeeming work. He has delivered us from our enemies, and therefore He commands us. He has given Himself for us, and therefore He has a right to say, Give yourselves to Me. He is God manifest in the flesh, and therefore absolute power becomes His lips, and utter submission is our dignity. To say to Him Lord, Lord, carries us whole universes beyond saying to Him, Rabbi, Rabbi.

**IV. And now, lastly, we have in this great discourse the authority of our Lord set forth as being the authority of Him who is to be the Judge of the world.**

Then will I profess unto you I never knew you; depart from Me, ye that work iniquity. He, the meek, the humble, who never claimed for Himself anything except what His consciousness compelled Him to assert, who desired only that men should know Him for what He was, because it was their life so to know Him, here declares that the whole world is to be judged by Him, that He has such knowledge of men as will pierce beneath the surface of professions and will be undazzled by the most stupendous miracles, and beneath the eloquent words of many a preacher and the wonderful works of many a so-called Christian philanthropist, will see the hidden rottenness that they never saw, and, tearing down the veil, will reveal men at the last to themselves.

That is no human function, that is no work that belongs to a mere teacher, pattern, martyr, sage, philosopher, or saint. That is a divine work; and the authority of Him whose final word to each of us will settle beyond appeal our fate, and reveal beyond cavil our character, is a divine authority. He has a right to command because He is going to judge; and the lips that declare the law are the lips that will read the sentence.

So, my brethren, do you take the whole Christ for yours, the Son of God, the crown and end of revelation, the sinless and the perfect, who died on the Cross for our salvation, and loves and pities, and is ready to help every one of us; who, therefore, commands us with an absolute authority, and who one day comes to be our Judge? If you turn to Him and ask Him, Art Thou He that should come? let Him speak for Himself, and He will answer you: I that speak unto thee am He. When He asks each of us, as He does now, Whom sayest thou that I am? oh that we may all answer, with the assent of our understandings, with the love of our hearts, with the submission of our wills, Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God.