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

**MATTHEW-068**. **THE GREATEST IN THE KINGDOM, AND THEIR REWARD by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"41.* *He that receiveth a prophet in the name of a prophet shall receive a prophet's reward; and he that receiveth a righteous man in the name of a righteous man shall receive a righteous man's reward. 42. And whosoever shall give to drink unto one of these little ones a cup of cold water only in the name of a disciple, verily I say unto you, he shall in no wise lose his reward."*

*Matthew 10:41-42*

There is nothing in these words to show whether they refer to the present or to the future. We shall probably not go wrong if we regard them as having reference to both. For all godliness has promise of the life that now is, as well as of that which is to come, and in keeping God's commandments, as well as for keeping them, there is great reward, a reward realised in the present, even although Death holds the keys of the treasure-house in which the richest rewards are stored. No act of holy obedience is here left without foretastes of joy, which, though they be but brooks by the way, contain the same water of life which hereafter swells to an ocean.

Some people tell us that it is defective morality in Christianity to bribe men to be good by promising them Heaven, and that he who is actuated by such a motive is selfish. Now that fantastic and overstrained objection may be very simply answered by two considerations: self-regard is not selfishness, and Christianity does not propose the future reward as the motive for goodness. The motive for goodness is love to Jesus Christ; and if ever there was a man who did acts of Christian goodness only for the sake of what he would get by them, the acts were not Christian goodness, because the motive was wrong. But it is a piece of fastidiousness to forbid us to reinforce the great Christian motive, which is love to Jesus Christ, by the thought of the recompense of reward. It is a stimulus and an encouragement of, not the motive for, goodness. This text shows us that it is a subordinate motive, for it says that the reception of a prophet, or of a righteous man, or of one of these little ones, which is rewardable, is the reception in the name ofa prophet, a disciple, and so on, or, in other words, is the recognising of the prophet, or the righteous man, or the disciple for what he is, and because he is that, and not because of the reward, receiving him with sympathy and solace and help.

So, with that explanation, let us look at these very remarkable words of our text.

**I. The first thing which I wish to observe in them is the three classes of character which are dealt with--prophet, righteous man, these little ones.**

Now the question that I would suggest is this: Is there any meaning in the order in which these are arranged? If so, what is it? Do we begin at the bottom, or at the top? Have we to do with an ascending or with a descending scale? Is the prophet thought to be greater than the righteous man, or less? Is the righteous man thought to be higher than the little one, or to be lower? The question is an important one, and worth considering.

Now, at first sight, it certainly does look as if we had here to do with a descending scale, as if we began at the top and went downwards. A prophet, a man honoured with a distinct commission from God to declare His will, is, in certain very obvious respects, loftier than a man who is not so honoured, however pure and righteous he may be. The dim and venerable figures, for instance, of Isaiah and Jeremiah, tower high above all their contemporaries; and godly men who hung upon their lips, like Baruch on Jeremiah's, felt themselves to be, and were, inferior to them. And, in like manner, the little child who believes in Christ may seem to be insignificant in comparison with the prophet with his God-touched lips, or the righteous man of the old dispensation with his austere purity; as a humble violet may seem by the side of a rose with its heart of fire, or a white lily regal and tall. But one remembers that Jesus Christ Himself declared that the least of the little oneswas greater than the greatest who had gone before; and it is not at all likely that He who has just been saying that whosoever received His followers received Himself, should classify these followers beneath the righteous men of old. The Christian type of character is distinctly higher than the Old Testament type; and the humblest believer is blessed above prophets and righteous men because his eyes behold and his heart welcomes the Christ.

Therefore I am inclined to believe that we have here an ascending series--that we begin at the bottom and not at the top; that the prophet is less than the righteous man, and the righteous man less than the little one who believes in Christ. For, suppose there were a prophet who was not righteous, and a righteous man who was not a prophet. Suppose the separation between the two characters were complete, which of them would be the greater? Balaam was a prophet; Balaam was not a righteous man; Balaam was immeasurably inferior to the righteous whose lives he did not emulate, though he could not but envy their deaths. In like manner the humblest believer in Jesus Christ has something that a prophet, if he is not a disciple, does not possess; and that which he has, and the prophet has not, is higher than the endowment that is peculiar to the prophet alone.

May we say the same thing about the difference between the righteous man and the disciple? Can there be a righteous man that is not a disciple? Can there be a disciple that is not a righteous man? Can the separation between these two classes be perfect and complete? No! in the profoundest sense, certainly not. But then at the time when Christ spoke there were some men standing round Him, who, as touching the righteousness which is of the law, were blameless. And there are many men to-day, with much that is noble and admirable in their characters, who stand apart from the faith that is in Jesus Christ; and if the separation be so complete as that, then it is to be emphatically and decisively pronounced that, if we have regard to all that a man ought to be, and if we estimate men in the measure in which they approximate to that ideal in their lives and conduct, the Christian is the highest style of man. The disciple is above the righteous men adorned with many graces of character, who, if they are not Christians, have a worm at the root of all their goodness, because it lacks the supreme refinement and consecration of faith; and above the fiery-tongued prophet, if he is not a disciple.

Now, brethren, this thought is full of very important practical inferences. Faith is better than genius. Faith is better than brilliant gifts. Faith is better than large acquirements. The poet's imagination, the philosopher's calm reasoning, the orator's tongue of fire, even the inspiration of men that may have their lips touched to proclaim God to their brethren, are all less than the bond of living trust that knits a soul to Jesus Christ, and makes it thereby partaker of that indwelling Saviour. And, in like manner, if there be men, as there are, and no doubt some of them among my hearers, adorned with virtues and graces of character, but who have not rested their souls on Jesus Christ, then high above these, too, stands the lowliest person who has set his faith and love on that Saviour. Neither intellectual endowments nor moral character are the highest, but faith in Jesus Christ. A man may be endowed with all brilliancy of intellect and fair with many beauties of character, and he may be lost; and on the other hand simple faith, rudimentary and germlike as it often is, carries in itself the prophecy of all goodness, and knits a man to the source of all blessedness. Whether there be tongues, they shall cease; whether there be knowledge, it shall vanish away. Now abideth these three, faith, hope, charity. Rejoice not that the spirits are subject unto you, but rather rejoice because your names are written in Heaven.

Ah! brethren, if we believed in Christ's classification of men, and in the order of importance and dignity in which He arranges them, it would make a wonderful practical difference to the lives, to the desires, and to the efforts of a great many of us. Some of you students, young men and women that are working at college or your classes, if you believed that it was better to trust in Jesus Christ than to be wise, and gave one-tenth, ay! one-hundredth part of the attention and the effort to secure the one which you do to secure the other, would be different people. Not many wise men after the flesh, but humble trusters in Jesus Christ, are the victors in the world. Believe you that, and order your lives accordingly.

Oh! what a reversal of this world's estimates is coming one day, when the names that stand high in the roll of fame shall pale, like photographs that have been shut up in a portfolio, and when you take them out have faded off the paper. The world knows nothing of its greatest men, but there is a time coming when the spurious mushroom aristocracy that the world has worshipped will be forgotten, like the nobility of some conquered land, who are brushed aside and relegated to private life by the new nobility of the conquerors, and when the true nobles, God's aristocrats, the righteous, who are righteous because they have trusted in Christ, shall shine forth like the sun in the Kingdom of My Father.

Here is the climax: gifts and endowments at the bottom, character and morality in the middle, and at the top faith in Jesus Christ.

**II. Now notice briefly in the second place the variety of the reward according to the character.**

The prophet has his, the righteous man has his, the little one has his. That is to say, each level of spiritual or moral stature receives its own prize. There is no difficulty in seeing that this is so in regard to the rewards of this life. Every faithful message delivered by a prophet increases that prophet's own blessedness, and has joys in the receiving of it from God, in the speaking of it to men, in the marking of its effects as it spreads through the world, which belong to him alone. In all these, and in many other ways, the prophethas rewards that no stranger can intermeddle with. All courses of obedient conduct have their own appropriate consequences and satisfaction. Every character is adapted to receive, and does receive, in the measure of its goodness, certain blessings and joys, here and now. Surely the righteous shall be recompensed in the earth.

And the same principle, of course, applies if we think of the reward as altogether future. It must be remembered, however, that Christianity does not teach, as I believe, that if there be a prophet or a righteous man who is not a disciple, that prophet or righteous man will get rewards in the future life. It must be remembered, too, that every disciple is righteous in the measure of his faith. Discipleship being presupposed, then the disciple who is a prophet will have one reward, and the disciple who is a righteous man shall have another; and where all three characteristics coincide, there shall be a triple crown of glory upon his head.

That is all plain and obvious enough, if only we get rid of the prejudice that the rewards of a future life are merely bestowed upon men by God's arbitrary good pleasure. What is the reward of Heaven? Eternal life, people say. Yes! Blessedness. Yes! But where does the life come from, and where does the blessedness come from? They are both derived, they come from God in Christ; and in the deepest sense, and in the only true sense, God is Heaven, and God is the reward of Heaven. I am thy shield, so long as dangers need to be guarded against, and then, thereafter, I am thine exceeding great Reward. It is the possession of God that makes all the Heaven of Heaven, the immortal life which His children receive, and the blessedness with which they are enraptured. We are heirs of immortality, we are heirs of life, we are heirs of blessedness, because, and in the measure in which, we become heirs of God.

And if that be so, then there is no difficulty in seeing that in Heaven, as on earth, men will get just as much of God as they can hold; and that in Heaven, as on earth, capacity for receiving God is determined by character. The gift is one, the reward is one, and yet the reward is infinitely various. It is the same light which glows in all the stars, but star differeth from star in glory. It is the same wine, the new wine of the Kingdom, that is poured into all the vessels, but the vessels are of divers magnitudes, though each be full to the brim.

And so in those two sister parables of our Master's, which are so remarkably discriminated and so remarkably alike, we have both these aspects of the Heavenly reward set forth--both that which declares its identity in all cases, and the other which declares its variety according to the recipient's character. All the servants receive the same welcome, the same prize, the same entrance into the same joy; although one of them had ten talents, and another five, and another two. But the servants who were each sent out to trade with one poor pound in their hands, and by their varying diligence reaped varying profits, were rewarded according to the returns that they had brought; and one received ten, and the other five, and the other two, cities over which to have authority and rule. So the reward is one, and yet infinitely diverse. It is not the same thing whether a man or a woman, being a Christian, is an earnest, and devoted, and growing Christian here on earth, or a selfish, and an idle, and a stagnant one. It is not the same thing whether you content yourselves with simply laying hold on Christ, and keeping a tremulous and feeble hold of Him for the rest of your lives, or whether you grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour. There is such a fate as being saved, yet so as by fire, and going into the brightness with the smell of the fire on your garments. There is such a fate as having just, as it were, squeezed into Heaven, and got there by the skin of your teeth. And there is such a thing as having an abundant entrance ministered, when its portals are thrown wide open. Some imperfect Christians die with but little capacity for possessing God, and therefore their heaven will not be as bright, nor studded with as majestic constellations, as that of others. The starry vault that bends above us so far away, is the same in the number of its stars when gazed on by the savage with his unaided eye, and by the astronomer with the strongest telescope; and the Infinite God, who arches above us, but comes near to us, discloses galaxies of beauty and oceans of abysmal light in Himself, according to the strength and clearness of the eye that looks upon Him. So, brethren, remember that the one glory has infinite degrees; and faith, and conduct, and character here determine the capacity for God which we shall have when we go to receive our reward.

**III. The last point that is here is the substantial identity of the reward to all that stand on the same level, however different may be the form of their lives.**

He that receiveth a prophet in the name of a prophet shall receive a prophet's reward. And so in the case of the others. The active prophet, righteous man, or disciple, and the passive recogniser of each in that character, who receives each as a prophet, or righteous man, or disciple, stand practically and substantially on the same level, though the one of them may have his lips glowing with the divine inspiration and the other may never have opened his mouth for God.

That is beautiful and deep. The power of sympathising with any character is the partial possession of that character for ourselves. A man who is capable of having his soul bowed by the stormy thunder of Beethoven, or lifted to Heaven by the ethereal melody of Mendelssohn, is a musician, though he never composed a bar. The man who recognises and feels the grandeur of the organ music of Paradise Losthas some fibre of a poet in him, though he be but a mute, inglorious Milton.

All sympathy and recognition of character involve some likeness to that character. The poor woman who brought the sticks and prepared food for the prophet entered into the prophet's mission and shared in the prophet's work and reward, though his task was to beard Ahab, and hers was only to bake Elijah's bread. The old knight that clapped Luther on the back when he went into the Diet of Worms, and said to him, Well done, little monk!shared in Luther's victory and in Luther's crown. He that helps a prophet because he is a prophet, has the making of a prophet in himself.

As all work done from the same motive is the same in God's eyes, whatever be the outward shape of it, so the work that involves the same type of spiritual character will involve the same reward. You find the Egyptian medal on the breasts of the soldiers that kept the base of communication as well as on the breasts of the men that stormed the works at Tel-el-Kebir. It was a law in Israel, and it is a law in Heaven: As his part is that goeth down into the battle, so shall his part be that tarrieth by the stuff, they shall part alike. I am going down into the pit, you hold the ropes, said Carey, the pioneer missionary. They that hold the ropes, and the daring miner that swings away down in the blackness, are one in the work, may be one in the motive, and, if they are, shall be one in the reward. So, brethren, though no coal of fire may be laid upon your lips, if you sympathise with the workers that are trying to serve God, and do what you can to help them, and identify yourself with them, and so hold the ropes, my text will be true about you. He that receiveth a prophet in the name of a prophet shall receive a prophet's reward. They who by reason of circumstances, by deficiency of power, or by the weight of other tasks and duties, can only give silent sympathy, and prayer, and help, are one with the men whom they help.

Dear brethren! remember that this awful, mystical life of ours is full everywhere of consequences that cannot be escaped. What we sow we reap, and we grind it, and we bake it, and we live upon it. We have to drink as we have brewed; we have to lie on the beds that we have made. Be not deceived: God is not mocked. The doctrine of reward has two sides to it. Nothing human ever dies. All our deeds drag after them inevitable consequences; but if you will put your trust in Jesus Christ, He will not deal with you according to your sins, nor reward you according to your iniquities; and the darkest features of the recompense of your evil will all be taken away by the forgiveness which we have in His blood. If you will trust yourselves to Him you will have that eternal life, which is not wages, but a gift; which is not reward, but a free bestowment of God's love. And then, if we build upon that Foundation on which alone men can build their hopes, their thoughts, their characters, their lives, however feeble may be our efforts, however narrow may be our sphere,--though we be neither prophets nor sons of prophets, and though our righteousness may be all stained and imperfect, yet, to our own amazement and to God's glory, we shall find, when the fire is kindled which reveals and tests our works, that, by the might of humble faith in Christ, we have built upon that Foundation, gold and silver and precious stones; and shall receive the reward given to every man whose work abides that trial by fire.