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

**MATTHEW-097**. **THE LAW OF PRECEDENCE IN THE KINGDOM by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"1.* *At the same time came the disciples unto Jesus, saying, Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? 2. And Jesus called a little child unto Him, and set him in the midst of them, 3. And said, Verily I say unto you, Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven. 4. Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, the same is greatest in the kingdom of heaven. 5. And whoso shall receive one such little child in My name receiveth Me. 6. But whoso shall offend one of these little ones which believe in Me, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea. 7. Woe unto the world because of offences! for it must needs be that offences come; but woe to that man by whom the offence cometh! 8. Wherefore if thy hand or thy foot offend thee, cut them off, and cast them from thee; it is better for thee to enter into life halt or maimed, rather than having two hands or two feet to be cast into everlasting fire. 9. And if thine eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee: it is better for thee to enter into life with one eye, rather than having two eyes to be cast into hell fire. 10. Take heed that ye despise not one of these little ones; for I say unto you, That in heaven their angels do always behold the face of My Father which is in heaven. 11. For the Son of Man is come to save that which was lost. 12. How think ye? if a man have an hundred sheep, and one of them be gone astray, doth he not leave the ninety and nine, and goeth into the mountains, and seeketh that which is gone astray? 13. And if so be that he find it, verily I say unto you, he rejoiceth more of that sheep, than of the ninety and nine which went not astray. 14. Even so it is not the will of your Father which is in heaven, that one of these little ones should perish."*

*Matthew 18:1-14*

Mark tells us that the disciples, as they journeyed, had been squabbling about pre-eminence in the kingdom, and that this conversation was brought on by our Lord's question as to the subject of their dispute. It seems at first sight to argue singular insensibility that the first effect of His reiterated announcement of His sufferings should have been their quarrelling for the lead; but their behaviour is intelligible if we suppose that they regarded the half-understood prophecies of His passion as indicating the commencement of the short conflict which was to end in His Messianic reign. So it was time for them to be getting ready and settling precedence. The form of their question, in Matthew, connects it with the miracle of the coin in the fish's mouth, in which there was a very plain assertion of Christ's royal dignity, and a distinguishing honour given to Peter. Probably the thenof the question means, Since Peter is thus selected, are we to look to him as foremost? Their conception of the kingdom and of rank in it is frankly and entirely earthly. There are to be graded dignities, and these are to depend on His mere will. Our Lord not only answers the letter of their question, but cuts at the root of the temper which inspired it.

**I. He shows the conditions of entrance into and eminence in His kingdom by a living example.**

There were always children at hand round Him, when He wanted them. Their quick instinct for pure and loving souls drew them to Him; and this little one was not afraid to be taken by the hand, and to be afterwards caught up in His arms, and pressed to His heart. One does not wonder that the legend that he was Ignatius the martyr should have been current; for surely the remembrance of that tender clasping arm and gentle breast would not fade nor be fruitless. The disciples had made very sure that they were to be in the kingdom, and that the only question concerning them was how high up in it they were each to be. Christ's answer is like a dash of cold water to that confidence. It is, in effect, Greatest in the kingdom! Make sure that you go in at all, first; which you will never do, so long as you keep your present ambitious minds.

Verse 3 lays down the condition of entrance into the kingdom, from which necessarily follows the condition of supremacy in it. What a child is naturally, and without effort or merit, by reason of age and position, we must become, if we are to pass the narrow portal which admits into the large room. That becomingis impossible without a revolution in us. Be convertedis corrected, in the Revised Version, into turn, and rightly; for there is in the word a distinct reference to the temper of the disciples as displayed by their question. As long as they cherished it they could not even get inside, to say nothing of winning promotion to dignities in the kingdom. Their very question condemned them as incapable of entrance. So there must be a radical change, not unaccompanied, of course, with repentance, but mainly consisting in the substitution of the child's temper for theirs. What is the temper thus enjoined? We are to see here neither the entirely modern and shallow sentimental way of looking at childhood, in which popular writers indulge, nor the doctrine of its innocence. It is not Christ's teaching, either that children are innocent, or that men enter the kingdom by making themselves so. But the child is, by its very position, lowly and modest, and makes no claims, and lives by instinctive confidence, and does not care about honours, and has these qualities which in us are virtues, and is not puffed up by possessing them. That is the ideal which is realised more generally in the child than analogous ideals are in mature manhood. Such simplicity, modesty, humility, must be ours. We must be made small ere we can enter that door. And as is the requirement for entrance, so is it for eminence. The child does not humble himself, but is humble by nature; but we must humble ourselves if we would be great.

Christ implies that there are degrees in the kingdom. It has a nobility, but of such a kind that there may be many greatest; for the principle of rank there is lowliness. We rise by sinking. The deeper our consciousness of our own unworthiness and weakness, the more capable are we of receiving the divine gifts, and therefore the more fully shall we receive them. Rivers run in the hollows; the mountain-tops are dry. God works with broken reeds, and the princes in His realm are beggars taken from the dunghill. A lowliness which made itself lowly for the sake of eminence would miss its aim, for it would not be lowliness. The desire to be foremost must be cast out, in order that it may be fulfilled.

**II. The question has been answered, and our Lord passes to other thoughts rising out of His answer.**

Verses 5 and 6 set forth antithetically our duties to His little ones. He is not now speaking of the child who served as a living parable to answer the question, but of men who have made themselves like the child, as is plain from the emphatic one such child, and from verse 6 (which believe on Me).

The subject, then, of these verses is the blessedness of recognising and welcoming Christlike lowly believers, and the fatal effect of the opposite conduct. To receive one such little child in My nameis just to have a sympathetic appreciation of, and to be ready to welcome to heart and home, those who are lowly in their own and in the world's estimate, but princes of Christ's court and kingdom. Such welcome and furtherance will only be given by one who himself has the same type of character in some degree. He who honours and admires a certain kind of excellence has the roots of it in himself. A possible artist lies in him who thrills at the sight or hearing of fair things painted or sung. Our admiration is an index of our aspiration, and our aspiration is a prophecy of our attainment. So it will be a little one's heart which will welcome the little ones, and a lover of Christ who receives them in His name. The reception includes all forms of sympathy and aid. In My nameis equivalent to for the sake of My revealed character, and refers both to the receiver and to the received. The blessedness of such reception, so far as the receiver is concerned, is not merely that he thereby comes into happy relations with Christ's foremost servants, but that he gets Christ Himself into his heart. If with true appreciation of the beauty of such a childlike disposition, I open my heart or my hand to its possessor, I do thereby enlarge my capacity for my own possession of Christ, who dwells in His child, and who comes with him where He is welcomed. There is no surer way of securing Him for our own than the loving reception of His children. Whoso lodges the King's favourites will not be left unvisited by the King. To recognise and reverence the greatest in the kingdom is to be oneself a member of their company, and a sharer in their prerogatives.

On the other hand, the antithesis of receivingis causing to stumble, by which is meant giving occasion for moral fall. That would be done by contests about pre-eminence, by arrogance, by non-recognition. The atmosphere of carnality and selfishness in which the disciples were moving, as their question showed, would stifle the tender life of any lowly believer who found himself in it; and they were not only injuring themselves, but becoming stumbling-blocks to others, by their ambition. How much of the present life of average Christians is condemned on the same ground! It is a good test of our Christian character to ask--would it help or hinder a lowly believer to live beside us? How many professing Christians are really, though unconsciously, doing their utmost to pull down their more Christlike brethren to their own low level! The worldliness and selfish ambitions of the Church are responsible for the stumbling of many who would else have been of Christ's little ones. But perhaps we are rather to think of deliberate and consciously laid stumbling-blocks. Knowingly to try to make a good man fall, or to stain a more than usually pure Christian character, is surely the very height of malice, and presupposes such a deadly hatred of goodness and of Christ that no fate can be worse than the possession of such a temper. To be flung into the sea, like a dog, with a stone round his neck, would be better for a man than to live to do such a thing. The deed itself, apart from any other future retribution, is its own punishment; yet our Lord's solemn words not only point to such a future retribution, which is infinitely more terrible than the miserable fate described would be for the body, but to the consequences of the act, as so bad in its blind hatred of the highest type of character, and in its conscious preference of evil, as well as so fatal in its consequences, that it were better to die drowned than to live so.

**III. Verses 10-14 set forth the honour and dignity of Christ's little ones. Clearly the application of the designation in these closing verses is exclusively to His lowly followers.**

The warning not to despise them is needed at all times, and, perhaps, seldom more, even by Christians, than now, when so many causes induce a far too high estimate of the world's great ones, and modest, humble godliness looks as dull and sober as some russet-coated little bird among gorgeous cockatoos and birds of paradise. The world's standard is only too current in the Church; and it needs a spirit kept in harmony with Christ's spirit, and some degree of the child-nature in ourselves, to preserve us from overlooking the delicate hidden beauties and unworldly greatness of His truest disciples.

The exhortation is enforced by two considerations,--a glimpse into heaven, and a parable. Fair interpretation can scarcely deny that Christ here teaches that His children are under angel-guardianship. We should neither busy ourselves in curious inferences from His reticent words, nor try to blink their plain meaning, but rather mark their connection and purpose here. He has been teaching that pre-eminence belongs to the childlike spirit. He here opens a door into the court of the heavenly King, and shows us that, as the little ones are foremost in the kingdom of heaven, so the angels who watch over them are nearest the throne in heaven itself. The representation is moulded on the usages of Eastern courts, and similar language in the Old Testament describes the principal courtiers as the men who see the King's face continually. So high is the honour in which the little ones are held, that the highest angels are set to guard them, and whatever may be thought of them on earth, the loftiest of creatures are glad to serve and keep them.

Following the Revised Version we omit verse 11. If it were genuine, the connection would be that such despising contradicted the purpose of Christ's mission; and the forwould refer back to the injunction, not to the glimpse into heaven which enforced it.

The exhortation is further confirmed by the parable of the ninety and nine, which is found, slightly modified in form and in another connection, in Luke xv. Its point here is to show the importance of the little ones as the objects of the seeking love of God, and as so precious to Him that their recovery rejoices His heart. Of course, if verse 11 be genuine, the Shepherd is Christ; but, if we omit it, the application of the parable in verse 14 as illustrating the loving will of God becomes more direct. In that case God is the owner of the sheep. Christ does not emphasise His own love or share in the work, reference to which was not relevant to His purpose, but, leaving that in shadow, casts all the light on the loving divine will, which counts the little ones as so precious that, if even one of them wanders, all heaven's powers are sent forth to find and recover it. The reference does not seem to be so much to the one great act by which, in Christ's incarnation and sacrifice, a sinful world has been sought and redeemed, as to the numberless acts by which God, in His providence and grace, restores the souls of those humble ones if ever they go astray. For the connection requires that the wandering sheep here should, when it wanders, be one of these little ones; and the parable is introduced to illustrate the truth that, because they belong to that number, the least of them is too precious to God to be allowed to wander away and be lost. They have for their keepers the angels of the presence; they have God Himself, in His yearning love and manifold methods of restoration, to look for them, if ever they are lost, and to bring them back to the fold. Therefore, see that ye despise not one of these little ones, each of whom is held by the divine will in the grasp of an individualising love which nothing can loosen.