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

**MATTHEW-102**. **THE REQUIREMENTS OF THE KING by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"16.* *And, behold, one came and said unto Him, Good Master, what good thing shall I do, that I may have eternal life? 17. And He said unto him, Why callest thou Me good? there is none good but One, that is, God: but if thou wilt enter into life, keep the commandments. 18. He saith unto Him, Which? Jesus said, Thou shalt do no murder, Thou shalt not commit adultery, Thou shalt not steal, Thou shalt not bear false witness, 19. Honour thy father and thy mother: and, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. 20. The young man saith unto Him, All these things have I kept from my youth up: what lack I yet? 21. Jesus said unto him, If thou wilt be perfect, go and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come and follow Me. 22. But when the young man heard that saying, he went away sorrowful: for he had great possessions. 23. Then said Jesus unto His disciples, Verily I say unto you, That a rich man shall hardly enter into the kingdom of heaven. 24. And again I say unto you, It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God. 25. When His disciples heard it, they were exceedingly amazed, saying, Who then can be saved? 26. But Jesus beheld them, and said unto them, With men this is impossible; but with God all things are possible."*

*Matthew 19:16-26*

We have here one of the saddest stories in the gospels. It is a true soul's tragedy. The young man is in earnest, but his earnestness has not volume and force enough to float him over the bar. He wishes to have some great thing bidden him to do, but he recoils from the sharp test which Christ imposes. He truly wants the prize, but the cost is too great; and yet he wishes it so much that he goes away without it in deep sorrow, which perhaps, at another day, ripened into the resolve which then was too high for him. There is a certain severity in our Lord's tone, an absence of recognition of the much good in the young man, and a naked stringency in His demand from him, which sound almost harsh, but which are set in their true light by Mark's note, that Jesus loved him, and therefore treated him thus. The truest way to draw ingenuous souls is not to flatter, nor to make entrance easy by dropping the standard or hiding the requirements, but to call out all their energy by setting before them the lofty ideal. Easy-going disciples are easily made--and lost. Thorough-going ones are most surely won by calling for entire surrender.

**I. We may gather together the earlier part of the conversation, as introductory to the Lord's requirement (vs. 16-20), in which we have the picture of a real though imperfect moral earnestness, and may note how Christ deals with it.**

Matthew tells us that the questioner was young and rich. Luke adds that he was a ruler--a synagogue official, that is--which was unusual for a young man, and indicates that his legal blamelessness was recognised. Mark adds one of his touches, which are not only picturesque, but character-revealing, by the information that he came runningto Jesus in the way, so eager was he, and fell at His feet, so reverential was he. His first question is singularly compacted of good and error. The fact that he came to Christ for a purely religious purpose, not seeking personal advantage for himself or for others, like the crowds who followed for loaves and cures, nor laying traps for Him with puzzles which might entangle Him with the authorities, nor asking theological questions for curiosity, but honestly and earnestly desiring to be helped to lay hold of eternal life, is to be put down to his credit. He is right in counting it the highest blessing.

Where had he got hold of the thought of eternal life? It was miles above the dusty speculations and casuistries of the rabbis. Probably from Christ Himself. He was right in recognising that the conditions of possessing it were moral, but his conception of goodwas superficial, and he thought more of doing good than of being good, and of the desired life as payment for meritorious actions. In a word, he stood at the point of view of the old dispensation. This do, and thou shalt live, was his belief; and what he wished was further instruction as to what thiswas. He was to be praised in that he docilely brought his question to Jesus, even though, as Christ's answer shows, there was error mingling in his docility. Such is the character--a young man, rich, influential, touched with real longings for the highest life, ready, so far as he knows himself, to do whatever he is bidden, in order to secure it.

We might have expected Christ, who opened His arms wide for publicans and harlots, to have welcomed this fair, ingenuous seeker with some kindly word. But He has none for him. We adopt the reading of the Revised Version, in which our Lord's first word is repellent. It is in effect--There is no need for your question, which answers itself. There is one good Being, the source and type of every good thing, and therefore the good, which you ask about, can only be conformity to His will. You need not come to Me to know what you are to do. He relegates the questioner, not to his own conscience, but to the authoritative revealed will of God in the law. Modern views of Christ's work, which put all its stress on the perfection of His moral character, and His office as a pattern of righteousness, may well be rebuked by the fact that He expressly disclaimed this character, and declared that, if He was only to be regarded as republishing the law of human conduct, His work was needless. Men have enough knowledge of what they must do to enter into life, without Jesus Christ. No doubt, Christ's moral teaching transcends that given of old; but His special work was not to tell men what to do, but to make it possible for them to do it; to give, not the law, but the power, both the motive and the impulse, which will fulfil the law. On another occasion He answered a similar question in a different manner. When the Jews asked Him, What must we do, that we may work the works of God?He replied by the plain evangelical statement: This is the work of God, that ye believe on Him whom He hath sent. Why did He not answer the young ruler thus? Only because He knew that he needed to be led to that thought by having his own self-complacency shattered, and the clinging of his soul to earth laid bare. The whole treatment of him here is meant to bring him to the apprehension of faith as preceding all truly good work.

The young man's second question says a great deal in its one word. It indicates astonishment at being remanded to these old, well-worn precepts, and might be rendered, What sort of commandments?as if taking it for granted that they must be new and peculiar. It is the same spirit as that which in all ages has led men who with partial insight longed after eternal life, to seek it by fantastic and unusual roads of extraordinary sacrifices or services--the spirit which filled monasteries, and invented hair shirts, and fastings, and swinging with hooks in your back at Hindoo festivals. The craving for more than ordinary good worksshows a profound mistake in the estimate of the ordinary, and a fatal blunder as to the relation between goodnessand eternal life.

So Christ answers the question by quoting the second half of the Decalogue, which deals with the homeliest duties, and appending to it the summary of the law, which requires love to our neighbour as to ourselves. Why does He omit the earlier half? Probably because He would meet the error of the question, by presenting only the plainest, most familiar commandments, and because He desired to excite the consciousness of deficiency, which could be most easily done in connection with these.

There is a touch of impatience in the rejoinder, All these have I kept, and more than a touch of self-satisfaction. The law has failed to accomplish one of its chief purposes in the young man, in that it has not taught him his sinfulness. No doubt he had a right to say that his outward life had been free from breaches of such very elementary morality which any old woman could have taught him. He had never gone below the surface of the commandments, nor below the surface of his acts, or he would not have answered so jauntily. He had yet to learn that the height of goodnessis reached, not by adding some strange new performances to the threadbare precepts of everyday duty, but by digging deep into these, and bottoming the fabric of our lives on their inmost spirit. He had yet to learn that whoever says, All these have I kept, thereby convicts himself of understanding neither them nor himself.

Still he was not at rest, although he had, as he fancied, kept them all. His last question is a plaintive, honest acknowledgment of the hungry void within, which no round of outward obediences can ever fill. He knows that he has not the inner fountain springing up into eternal life. He is dimly aware of something wanting, whether in his obedience or no, at all events in his peace; and he is right in believing that the reason for that conscious void is something wanting in his conduct. But he will not learn what Christ has been trying to teach him, that he needs no new commandment, but a deeper understanding and keeping of the old. Hence his question, half a wail of a hungry heart, half petulant impatience with Christ's reiteration of obvious duties. There are multitudes of this kind in all ages, honestly wishing to lay hold of eternal life, able to point to virtuous conduct, anxious to know and do anything lacking, and yet painfully certain that something is wanting somewhere.

**II. Now comes the sharp-pointed test, which pricks the brilliant bubble.**

Mark tells us that Jesus accompanied His word with one of those looks which searched a soul, and bore His love into it. If thou wouldest be perfect, takes up the confession of something lacking, and shows what that is. It is unnecessary to remark that this commandment to sell all and give to the poor is intended only for the individual case. No other would-be disciple was called upon to do so. It cannot be meant for others; for, if all were sellers, where would the buyers be? Nor need we do more than point out that the command of renunciation is only half of Christ's answer, the other being, Come, follow Me. But we are not to slide easily over the precept with the comfortable thought that it was special treatment for a special case. The principle involved in it is medicine for all, and the only way of healing for any. This man was tied to earth by the cords of his wealth. They did not hinder him from keeping the commandments, for he had no temptations to murder, or adultery, or theft, or neglect of parents. But they did hinder him from giving his whole self up, and from regarding eternal life as the most precious of all things. Therefore for him there was no safety short of entire outward denuding himself of them; and, if he was in earnest out and out in his questions, here was a new thing for him to do. Others are hindered by other things, and they are called to abandon these. The one thing needful for entrance into life is at bottom self-surrender, and the casting away of all else for its sovereign sake. I do count them but dungmust be the language of every one who will win Christ. The hands must be emptied of treasures, and the heart swept clear of lesser loves, if He is to be grasped by our hands, and to dwell in our hearts. More of us than we are willing to believe are kept from entire surrender to Jesus Christ, by money and worldly possessions; and many professing Christians are kept shrivelled and weak and joyless because they love their wealth more than their Lord, and would think it madness to do as this man was bidden to do. When ballast is thrown out, the balloon shoots up. A general unlading of the thick claywhich weighs down the Christian life of England, would let thousands soar to heights which they will never reach as long as they love money and what it buys as much as they do. The letter of this commandment may be only applicable in a special case (though, perhaps, this one young man was not the only human being that ever needed this treatment), but the spirit is of universal application. No man enters into life who does not count all things but loss, and does not die to them all, that he may follow Christ.

**III. Then comes the collapse of all the enthusiasm.**

The questioner's earnestness chills at the touch of the test. What has become of the eagerness which brought him running to Jesus, and of the willingness to do any hard task to which he was set? It was real, but shallow. It deceived himself. But Christ's words cut down to the inner man, and laid bare for his own inspection the hard core of selfish worldliness which lay beneath. How many radiant enthusiasms, which cheat their subjects quite as much as their beholders, disappear like tinted mist when the hard facts of self-sacrifice strike against them! How much sheer worldliness disguises itself from itself and from others in glistering garments of noble sentiments, which fall at a touch when real giving up is called for, and show the ugly thing below! How much religiongoes about the world, and gets made a rulerof the synagogue in recognition of its excellence, which needs but this Ithuriel's spear to start up in its own shape! The completeness and immediateness of the collapse are noticeable. The young man seems to speak no word, and to take no time for reflection. He stands for a moment as if stunned, and then silently turns away. What a moment! his fate hung on it. Once more we see the awful mystery enacted before our eyes, of a soul gathering up its power to put away life. Who will say that the decision of a moment, which is the outcome of all the past, may not fix the whole future? This man had never before been consciously brought to the fork in the road; but now the two ways are before him, and, knowingly, he chooses the worse. Christ did not desire him to do so; but He did desire that he should choose, and should know that he did. It was the truest kindness to tear away the veil of surface goodness which hid him from himself, and to force him to a conscious decision.

One sign of grace he does give, in that he went away sorrowful. He is not angry nor careless. He cannot see the fair prospect of the eternal life, which he had in some real fashion desired, fade away, without a pang. If he goes back to the world, he goes back feeling more acutely than ever that it cannot satisfy him. He loves it too well to give it up, but not enough to feel that it is enough. Surely, in coming days, that godly sorrow would work a change of the foolish choice, and we may hope that he found no rest till he cast away all else to make Christ his own. A soul which has travelled as far on the road to life eternal as this man had done, can scarcely thereafter walk the broad road of selfishness and death with entire satisfaction.

**IV. The section closes with Christ's comment on the sad incident.**

He speaks no word of condemnation, but passes at once from the individual to the general lesson of the difficulty which rich men (or, as He explains it in Mark, men who trust in riches) have in entering the kingdom. The reflection breathes a tone of pity, and is not so much blame as a merciful recognition of special temptations which affect His judgment, and should modify ours. A camel with its great body, long neck, and hump, struggling to get through a needle's eye, is their emblem. It is a new thing to pity rich men, or to think of their wealth as disqualifying them for anything. The disciples, with childish naïvté wonder. We may wonder that they wondered. They could not understand what sort of a kingdom it was into which capitalists would find entrance difficult. All doors fly open for them to-day, as then. They do not find much difficulty in getting into the church, however hard it may be to get into the kingdom. But it still remains true that the man who has wealth has a hindrance to his religious character, which, like all hindrances, may be made a help by the use he makes of it; and that the man who trusts in riches, which he who possesses them is wofully likely to do, has made the hindrance into a barrier which he cannot pass.

That is a lesson which commercial nations, like England, have need to lay to heart, not as a worn-out saying of the Bible, which means very little for us, but as heavy with significance, and pointing to the special dangers which beset Christian perfection.

So real is the peril of riches, that Christ would have His disciples regard the victory over it as beyond our human power, and beckons us away from the effort to overcome the love of the world in our strength, pointing us to God, in whose mighty grace, breathed into our feeble wills and treacherous hearts, is the only force which can overcome the attraction of perishable riches, and make any of us willing or able to renounce them all that we may win Christ. The young ruler had just shown that with men this is impossible. Perhaps he still lingered near enough to catch the assurance that the surrender, which had been too much for him to achieve, might yet be joyfully made, since with God all things are possible.