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

**MATTHEW-121**. **THE KING ON HIS JUDGMENT THRONE by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"31.* *When the Son of Man shall come in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, then shall He sit upon the throne of His glory: 32. And before Him shall be gathered all nations: and He shall separate them one from another, as a shepherd divideth his sheep from the goats: 33. And He shall set the sheep on His right hand, but the goats on the left. 34. Then shall the King say unto them on His right hand, Come, ye blessed of My Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: 35. For I was an hungred, and ye gave Me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave Me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took Me in: 36. Naked, and ye clothed Me: I was sick, and ye visited Me: I was in prison, and ye came unto Me. 37. Then shall the righteous answer Him, saying, Lord, when saw we Thee an hungred, and fed Thee? or thirsty, and gave Thee drink? 38. When saw we Thee a stranger, and took Thee in! or naked, and clothed Thee! 39. Or when saw we Thee sick, or in prison, and came unto Thee? 10. And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these My brethren, ye have done it unto Me. 41. Then shall He say also unto them on the left hand, Depart from Me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels: 42. For I was an hungred, and ye gave Me no meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave Me no drink: 43. I was a stranger, and ye took Me not in: naked, and ye clothed Me not: sick, and in prison, and ye visited Me not. 44. Then shall they also answer Him, saying, Lord, when saw we Thee an hungred, or athirst, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and did not minister unto Thee? 45. Then shall He answer them, saying, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye did it not to one of the least of these, ye did it not to Me. 46. And these shall go away into everlasting punishment: but the righteous into life eternal."*

*Matthew 25:31-46*

The teachings of that wonderful last day of Christ's ministry, which have occupied so many of our pages, are closed with this tremendous picture of universal judgment. It is one to be gazed upon with silent awe, rather than to be commented on. There is fear lest, in occupying the mind in the study of the details, and trying to pierce the mystery it partly unfolds, we should forget our own individual share in it. Better to burn in on our hearts the thought, I shall be there, than to lose the solemn impression in efforts to unravel the difficulties of the passage. Difficulties there are, as is to be expected in even Christ's revelation of so unparalleled a scene. Many questions are raised by it which will never be solved till we stand there. Who can tell how much of the parabolic element enters into the description? We, at all events, do not venture to say of one part, This is merely drapery, the sensuous representation of spiritual reality, and of another, That is essential truth. The curtain is the picture, and before we can separate the elements of it in that fashion, we must have lived through it. Let us try to grasp the main lessons, and not lose the spirit in studying the letter.

**I. The first broad teaching is that Christ is the Judge of all the earth.**

Sitting there, a wearied man on the Mount of Olives, with the valley of Jehoshaphat at His feet, which the Jew regarded as the scene of the final judgment, Jesus declared Himself to be the Judge of the world, in language so unlimited in its claims that the speaker must be either a madman or a god. Calvary was less than three days off, when He spoke thus. The contrast between the vision of the future and the reality of the present is overwhelming. The Son of Man has come in weakness and shame; He will come in His glory, that flashing light of the self-revealing God, of which the symbol was the glorywhich shone between the cherubim, and which Jesus Christ here asserts to belong to Him as His glory. Then, heaven will be emptied of its angels, who shall gather round the enthroned Judge as His handful of sorrowing followers were clustered round Him as He spoke, or as the peasants had surrounded the meek state of His entry yesterday. Then, He will take the place of Judge, and sit, in token of repose, supremacy, and judgment, on the throne of His glory, as He now sat on the rocks of Olivet. Then, mankind shall be massed at His feet, and His glance shall part the infinite multitudes, and discern the character of each item in the crowd as easily and swiftly as the shepherd's eye picks out the black goats from among the white sheep. Observe the difference in the representation from those in the previous parables. There, the parting of kinds was either self-acting, as in the case of the foolish maidens; or men gave account of themselves, as in the case of the servants with the talents. Here, the separation is the work of the Judge, and is completed before a word is spoken. All these representations must be included in the complete truth as to the final judgment. It is the effect of men's actions; it is the result of their compelled disclosing of the deepest motives of their lives; it is the act of the perfect discernment of the Judge. Their deeds will judge them; they will judge themselves; Christ will judge.

Singularly enough, every possible interpretation of the extent of the expression all nationshas found advocates. It has been taken in its widest and plainest meaning, as equivalent to the whole race; it has been confined to mankind exclusive of Christians, and it has been confined to Christians exclusive of heathens. There are difficulties in all these explanations, but probably the least are found in the first. It is most natural to suppose that all nationsmeans all nations, unless that meaning be impossible. The absence of the limitation to the kingdom of heaven, which distinguishes this section from the preceding ones having reference to judgment, and the position of the present section as the solemn close of Christ's teachings, which would naturally widen out into the declaration of the universal judgment, which forms the only appropriate climax and end to the foregoing teachings, seem to point to the widest meaning of the phrase. His office of universal Judge is unmistakably taught throughout the New Testament, and it seems in the highest degree unnatural to suppose that He did not speak of it in these final words of prophetic warning. We may therefore, with some confidence, see in the magnificent and awful picture here drawn the vision of universal judgment. Parabolic elements there no doubt are in the picture; but we have no governing revelation, free from these, by which we can check them, and be sure of how much is form and how much substance. This is clear, that we must all appear before the judgment-seat of Christ; and this is clear, that Jesus Christ put forth, when at the very lowest point of His earthly humiliation, these tremendous claims, and asserted His authority as Judge over every soul of man. We are apt to lose ourselves in the crowd. Let us pause and think that allincludes me.

**II. Note the principles of Christ's universal judgment.**

It is important to remember that this section closes a series of descriptions of the judgment, and must not be taken as if, when isolated, it set forth all the truth. It is often harped upon by persons who are unfriendly to evangelical teaching, as if it were Christ's only word about judgment, and interpreted as if it meant that, no matter what else a man was, if only he is charitable and benevolent, he will find mercy. But this is to forget all the rest of our Lord's teaching in the context, and to fly in the face of the whole tenor of New Testament doctrine. We have here to do with the principles of judgment which apply equally to those who have, and to those who have not, heard the gospel. The subjects of the kingdom are shown the principles more immediately applicable to them, in the previous parables, and here they are reminded that there is a standard of judgment absolutely universal. All men, whether Christians or not, are judged by the things done in the body, whether they be good or bad. So Christ teaches in His closing words of the Sermon on the Mount, and in many another place. Every tree that bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire. The productive source of good works is not in question here; stress is laid on the fruits, rather than on the root. The gospel is as imperative in its requirements of righteousness as the law is, and its conception of the righteousness which it requires is far deeper and wider. The subjects of the kingdom ever need to be reminded of the solemn truth that they have not only, like the wise maidens, to have their lights burning and their oil vessels filled, nor only, like the wise servants, to be using the gifts of the kingdom for their lord, but, as members of the great family of man, have to cultivate the common moralities which all men, heathen and Christian, recognise as binding on all, without which no man shall see the Lord. The special form of righteousness which is selected as the test is charity. Obviously it is chosen as representative of all the virtues of the second table of the law. Taken in its bare literality, this would mean that men's relations to God had no effect in the judgment, mid that no other virtues but this of charity came into the account. Such a conclusion is so plainly repugnant to all Christ's teaching, that we must suppose that love to one's neighbour is here singled out, just as it is in His summary of the law and the prophets, as the crown and flower of all relative duties, and as, in a very real sense, being the fulfilling of the law. The omission of any reference to the love of God sufficiently shows that the view here is rigidly limited to acts, and that all the grounds of judgment are not meant to be set forth.

But the benevolence here spoken of is not the mere natural sentiment, which often exists in great energy in men whose moral nature is, in other respects, so utterly un-Christlike that their entrance into the kingdom prepared for the righteous is inconceivable. Many a man has a hundred vices and yet a soft heart. It is very much a matter of temperament. Does Christ so contradict all the rest of His teaching as to say that such a man is of the sheep, and blessed of the Father? Surely not. Is every piece of kindliness to the distressed, from whatever motive, and by whatsoever kind of person done, regarded by Him as done to Himself? To say so, would be to confound moral distinctions, and to dissolve all righteousness into a sentimental syrup. The deeds which He regards as done to Himself, are done to His brethren. That expression carries us into the region of motive, and runs parallel with His other words about receiving a prophet, and giving a cup of cold water to one of these little ones, because they are His. Seeing that all nations are at the bar, the expression, My brethren, cannot be confined to the disciples, for many of those who are being judged have never come in contact with Christians, nor can it be reasonably supposed to include all men, for, however true it is that Christ is every man's brother, the recognition of kindred here must surely be confined to those at the right hand. Whatever be included under the righteous, that is included under the brethren. We seem, then, led to recognise in the expression a reference to the motive of the beneficence, and to be brought to the conclusion that what the Judge accepts as done to Himself is such kindly help and sympathy as is extended to these His kindred, with some recognition of their character, and desire after it. To receive a prophetimplies that there is some spiritual affinity with him in the receiver. To give help to His brethren, because they are so, implies some affinity with Him or feeling after likeness to Him and them. Now, if we hold fast by the universality of the judgment here depicted, we shall see that this recognition must necessarily have different degrees in those who have heard of Christ and in those who have not. In the former, it will be equivalent to that faith which is the root of all goodness, and grasps the Christ revealed in the gospel. In the latter, it can be no more than a feeling after Him who is the light that lighteneth every man that cometh into the world. Surely there are souls amid the darkness of heathenism yearning toward the light, like plants grown in the dark. By ways of His own, Christ can reach such hearts, as the river of the water of life may percolate through underground channels to many a tree which grows far from its banks.

**III. Note the surprises of the judgment.**

The astonishment of the righteous is not modesty disclaiming praise, but real wonder at the undreamed-of significance of their deeds. In the parable of the talents, the servants unveiled their inmost hearts, and accurately described their lives. Here, the other side of the truth is brought into prominence, that, at that day, we shall be surprised when we hear from His lips what we have really done. True Christian beneficence has consciously for its motive the pleasing of Christ; but still he who most earnestly strove, while here, to do all as unto Jesus, will be full of thankful wonder at the grace which accepts his poor service, and will learn, with fresh marvelling, how closely He associates Himself with His humblest servant. There is an element of mystery hidden from ourselves in all our deeds. Our love to Christ's followers never goes out so plainly to Him that, while here, we can venture to be sure that He takes it as done for Him. We cannot here follow the flight of the arrow, nor know what meaning He will attach to, or what large issues He will evolve from, our poor doings. So heaven will be full of blessed surprises, as we reap the fruit growing in powerof what we sowed in weakness, and as doleful will be the astonishment which will seize those who see, for the first time, in the lurid light of that day, the true character of their lives, as one long neglect of plain duties, which was all a defrauding the Saviour of His due. Mere doing nothing is enough to condemn, and its victims will be shudderingly amazed at the fatal wound it has inflicted on them.

**IV. The irrevocableness of the judgment.**

That is an awful contrast between the Come! ye blessed, and Depart! ye cursed. That is a more awful parallel between eternal punishmentand eternal life. It is futile to attempt to alleviate the awfulness by emptying the word eternalof reference to duration. It no doubt connotes quality, but its first meaning is ever-during. There is nothing here to suggest that the one condition is more terminable than the other. Rather, the emphatic repetition of the word brings the unending continuance of each into prominence, as the point in which these two states, so wofully unlike, are the same. In whatever other passages the doctrine of universal restoration may seem to find a foothold, there is not an inch of standing-room for it here. Reverently accepting Christ's words as those of perfect and infallible love, the present writer feels so strongly the difficulty of bringing all the New Testament declarations on this dread question into a harmonious whole, that he abjures for himself dogmatic certainty, and dreads lest, in the eagerness of discussing the duration (which will never be beyond the reach of discussion), the solemn reality of the fact of future retribution should be dimmed, and men should argue about the terror of the Lordtill they cease to feel it.