

THE CHARACTER OF THE CHRISTIAN

Matthew 5: 1-4

For Christ the days of privacy were over. He had emerged from the seclusion and quietude of Nazareth and had begun to tread the pathway of the public preacher and teacher. All sorts of people were soon attracted to Him; some by His words and others by His works. In order to get away from the multitudes Christ ascended the mountain and left them in the valley. The twelve apostles, whom He had called to be His helpers and whom He had appointed to take the places of leadership in His Kingdom, followed their Lord up the mountainside to a spot overlooking the beautiful blue water of the Sea of Galilee. Many others followed them also.

Christ's disciples needed instruction from Him as to what they should be and do before they would be able to do their work for Him intelligently and effectively. That accounts for the statement, "And when he was set, his disciples came unto him: And he opened his mouth, and taught them." The expression, "And he opened his mouth," indicated Christ's manner of speaking, meaning that He articulated clearly. He spoke with simplicity, tenderness, liberty, boldness, faithfulness and authority. His sermon was a solemn and dignified utterance concerning the principles of conduct which must prevail in the lives of the citizens in His kingdom, as well as an opening of the heart and mind of Christ to His assistants.

The Sermon on the Mount opens with the Beatitudes rather than "Do-attitudes." Our Lord did not begin His matchless sermon by pronouncing a blessing upon His listeners for having or doing anything, but primarily because of their being something. With Him it was not a matter of what His listeners had or did, but of what they were. The Beatitudes suggest ideal relationships with God and with men.

Each of the Beatitudes begins with the word "blessed," which is sometimes translated "happy." Everybody is longing and searching for happiness. Every person would like to know how to achieve happiness. Our Lord taught that happiness does not depend upon having or upon doing, but on being. Blessedness does not depend upon the kind of house in which you live, but upon the person who lives in the house. It does not depend upon the garments in which you dress, but upon the kind of individual who wears them. True happiness depends on an inward condition rather than on outward circumstances or material possessions. The road to happiness is the same today as it was when Christ delivered the Sermon on the Mount.

"Blessed" is a word which many today consider debased currency. It has gathered about it associations of a smug and not too healthy piety. People nowadays are not sure that they want to be "blessed." They want to be happy. They are keen to be healthy. They like to be successful, to make good in life, and to draw from experience the best qualities it can impart, but they are not stirred by the word "blessed." Nevertheless, "blessed," is such a condition as to create a consciousness of a perfect peace, a perfect joy and a perfect rest. All of these things are included in God's will for man's life.

The first of these sayings is comprehensive: "Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." This does not have any reference whatever to poverty of possessions. The poor man's poverty will not give him any more claim upon heaven than the rich man's wealth. Poverty is not a blessing in itself, though by creating a sense of need it may become a means of blessing.

The first characteristic of a citizen of Christ's kingdom is that he is conscious of his spiritual poverty. He does not boast of his talents or his attainments, because he knows that he does not have anything which he has not received. He does not have the attitude of the Pharisee who was unaware of his spiritual poverty and need. Rather, he is like the publican who was conscious of his deep need and confessed himself a sinner. Aware of his shortcomings, he freely acknowledged that in himself there was nothing to meet his need.

"The poor in spirit" are the very antitheses of the complacent, the proud and the self-satisfied. The hopeless condition is when a man is satisfied with himself and sure that there is not anything wrong with him. Of one thing you may be sure -- the proud in spirit are unblessed. Pride always spoils fellowship and isolates one from others. As long as arrogance, pride, self-exaltation and self-sufficiency constitute one's attitude, he cannot receive the blessings of God.

To be "poor in spirit" means to be entirely free of conceit, pride and self-sufficiency. The man who is "poor in spirit" is the one who has realized his own inability to cope with life and has put his whole trust in God in Whom help and strength are found. He has realized that things mean nothing but that God means everything. He has discovered that he cannot do any good thing without divine assistance, and that he does not have any power in himself to enable him to do what God requires of him.

Instead of cherishing the self-satisfied spirit that made Rousseau make the impious boast that he would stand at the bar of God with his Book of Confessions in his hand, and challenge any one living to say, "I am better than that man," it is infinitely better to kneel with Toplady, and cry:

"Nothing in my hand I bring,
Simply to Thy cross I cling;
Naked, come to Thee for dress;
Helpless, look to Thee for grace;
Foul, I to the fountain fly:
Wash me, Saviour, or I die."

"Oh, the happiness of the man who has realized his own utter helplessness, and who has put his whole trust in God!" It is wonderful to know that, as God's children, we can draw upon His inexhaustible resources. Yet, when we compare our possibilities with our performances, we are grieved by the realization of how far short we fall.

One wonders if any of Christ's sayings was more difficult to understand than the second Beatitude: "Blessed are they that mourn; for they shall be comforted." His listeners had experienced trouble, but few of them, if any, had discovered the blessing hidden in it. It is even so today. We do not welcome trouble or sorrow. Mourning is irksome and hateful to human nature. From suffering and sadness our spirits instinctively shrink. The average person includes mourning among the undesirable experiences of life. He cannot visualize any good thing coming out of it. People seek the fellowship of the cheerful and joyous. However, there are some who make a luxury of grief. Their favorite indulgence is self-pity. They make the most of every opportunity to recount their woes, until their hearers conclude that they really enjoy it. Christ's statement, "Blessed are they that mourn," is a real challenge to our modern habit of extolling the pleasant and of declaring that blessedness comes from the easy way of life.

There is no need for anybody to prove to us the reality of pain, sorrow and grief. These things have visited our families, and we have experienced them in our own lives. Most people find it hard to accept their sorrows, even to admit the right of sorrow to enter their world at all. To the average person sorrow appears as sheer tragedy, unlit, save for those who have faith enough, by the faintest rainbow of hope.

The word which is translated "mourn" in this Beatitude does not mean a slight sorrow, but it signifies an unpleasant and severe experience of grief which is too great and too deep for concealment. It takes such a hold on one that it cannot be hidden.

When Christ uttered this verse He did not have in mind all mourners or all kinds of mourning. The very nature of the case precluded such an idea. The mourning to which He referred applied only to those who were His disciples. In other words, this verse is applicable to Christians only. When applied to Christians, all mourning is given the promise of blessing and comfort. According to Romans 8:28, Paul said, "And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose." Grief is real to both the saved and the unsaved, but the Christian is "calm in grief because rich in trust."

Comfort, which is relief from something that is unpleasant, is not always in the removal of the cause of the mourning. There may be comfort without the removal of the cause. Fear of the darkness may be relieved, not by the removal of the darkness but, by the presence of a companion in whom we have implicit confidence. Christian comfort often comes through this channel. The consciousness of God's presence in the dark and lonely hour of some distressing experience is our comfort. David expressed this idea in the words, "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me." Never let mourning lead you to despair. Look upon every occasion for mourning with a feeling that somewhere in it there is a blessing in disguise. Always give God the time which He deems wise for the fulfillment of this promise of comfort.

Every type of mourning is not included in this verse. There is much over which the believer in Christ should mourn. His own unworthiness, sins and failures are a source of great grief. The barrenness of his life and the lack of love for the Lord should cause a Christian to mourn. Sins in the life are an evidence of ingratitude to God, hostility to Him, lack of communion with Him and an injury to self by causing so many blessings to be withheld. The closer that one lives to Christ the more will he mourn over all that dishonors his Lord.

"They shall be comforted" is a promise that receives constant fulfillment in the experience of the Christian. Though he mourns his excuseless failures and confesses them to God, yet he is comforted by the assurance that the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses him from all sin. Though he groans over the dishonor done to God on every side, yet he is comforted by the knowledge that the day is rapidly approaching when Satan shall be removed from these scenes, and when the Lord Jesus shall sit upon the throne of His glory and rule in perfect righteousness and peace. "Comforted" is a very strong word, giving the promise of wonderful confidence and security, and a joyful assurance that all is well. When we meet with hardship, pain and grief, it is wonderful to know that we shall be comforted. Christ brings consolation to those who mourn for sin by granting forgiveness. He consoles those who weep for the dead by shedding light on the life beyond the grave.