

## **The Beatitudes (1) - Blessed are the poor in spirit**

Though the Lord taught on many occasions and said things in a great variety of situations, the most systematic and the most detailed exposition of His teaching is contained in what is now universally referred to as the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew's Gospel chapters five to seven. Parts of it you may remember well. Certain things said are singularly unforgettable. At the commencement, the Lord spoke of happiness and blessedness and who will find it. He went on to stress the importance of the Commandments and showed how it is that inner desire to do an evil can be just as sinful as if the act itself were committed.

He spoke of non resistance to evil and love of enemies; about prayer and Providence; about judgment of others and the manner in which we should strive to act in relation to those around us. He said "So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets." (Matthew 7:12)

Wonderful as the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount is, at the same time it is not without its problems and difficulties. People tend to talk of it even as visionary and idealistic and as setting impossible standards. The question of non resistance to evil is a case in point. The Lord said, "You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. (Matthew 5:38,39) Fine in theory, many would say, but impossible in practice.

And then on the subject of providential care. What shall we eat or, what shall we drink or what shall we wear? "Your heavenly father knows what you need, so do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself." Here again, though it may sound fine in theory, it would seem impossible in practice.

There is, however, probably no one section of the Sermon on the Mount which troubles people more in this regard than the teaching on blessedness and happiness which comes first; the section which is otherwise known as the Beatitudes. The Lord said,

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled.

Blessed are the merciful, for they will obtain mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you, because of me. Rejoice and be glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you."(Matthew 5, 2-12)

I spoke of people being troubled by the teaching of the Beatitudes, their difficulties arising because of what is commonly thought regarding 'the poor in spirit' and also with regard to some of the other qualities and virtues which are singled out. Meekness, for instance, is commonly equated with spinelessness; with tame surrender and submissiveness. And yet the meek are said to inherit the earth. And what of the peacemakers? Who are they? There are all sorts of questions which arise when we start thinking about these things.

In the next few talks we shall be examining the Beatitudes in detail, striving for a true understanding of what the Lord taught by them. There can be no possible disputing their importance, for here the Lord set out those virtues and qualities which lead to salvation. But that importance has become obscured because of an inadequate and sometimes false understanding of what is meant.

Whilst I shall return to the point on other occasions, there is a general observation I would make at the outset concerning the Beatitudes. If a person is to know blessing in their life, the serenity of soul and abiding happiness which the Lord ever seeks to bestow upon all people, there is something which they themselves must do. The Beatitudes are so worded that we cannot fail to grasp the point. According to the effort that we ourselves make, so the Lord is able to bless our lives. One of the old ideas was that salvation is an unmerited gift bestowed by God according as He chose. But this is just not so. Everyone is invited to make the effort, and to the extent they

do, they will know blessing and the nearness of heaven. It is those who mourn who can be comforted. It is those who hunger and thirst after righteousness who can be filled. It is the pure in heart who shall see God.

The first Beatitude, and the one with which we are especially concerned in this talk reads, "Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Here of course is a mighty promise. The Lord says, "Theirs is the kingdom of heaven." What then is meant by being poor in spirit? For obvious reasons we all want to know.

With regard to the misconceptions which have grown up around the term 'poor in spirit' I would say only this. The words do not refer to the external circumstances of our lives, though strangely, some have thought this. They do not mean 'poor-spirited', as someone abject or downcast. What they do mean are those who acknowledge their spiritual poverty; who recognise the absence in their lives of spiritual values; people who can genuinely see that of themselves, and apart from the Lord, they have no goodness or understanding of truth. It is to see and accept how poor we are spiritually, that is meant, and how much in need of the Lord we are. "Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. And, as in Luke's version of the Beatitudes, "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.

This then is the first and most basic quality which enables heaven to be present with us; a realisation of spiritual poverty and that, in truth, we have nothing of our own in which to trust. It is to confess that we are ignorant and need enlightenment. It is to see that we are prone to evils and need strength from above to overcome them. It is to acknowledge our need of the Lord and our dependence on Him.

This is what was lacking with the rich young man spoken of elsewhere in the Gospels. The trouble with that young man was that he was well endowed spiritually in his own eyes. He had kept all the Commandments from his youth upwards, was proud of himself, and thought this spoke of certain qualities inherent in himself. But the Lord told him to go and divest himself of such riches; to get rid of the sneaking self satisfaction which was there and this sense of his own worth which he had, and then he shall have treasure in heaven. (Mark 10, 21)

What is spoken of in this first Beatitude is something which must be genuinely present. It is an easy thing to speak of, dependence on the Lord, it is another thing to really mean it. What is meant is a willingness to be led by Him in all things; to accept His teaching, and to be guided by it, in all situations. And that of course is no easy matter. It means total acknowledgement of the fact that all that is good in our lives, both in our thoughts and affections, and also in our actions, is entirely His. We can claim no merit for it and, in reality, we deserve no praise for it.

Swedenborg wrote, "By the poor and needy in the Word, means those who believe that they know nothing (and can do nothing) from themselves.' (*Apocalypse Explained* 113). And such belief and acknowledgment can be summed up in the one word - humility. Blessed are the truly humble, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Swedenborg also wrote 'The Lord cannot be conjoined with man unless man is in humble worship; and there is no humble worship unless man acknowledges and believes that he is dust and ashes, that is, nothing but evil, and that Jehovah or the Lord is the Most Great and Most Holy, and that, of himself, he dare not approach Him. When a person is in such humble worship, the Lord can flow in with the life of His love, and give heaven and eternal happiness. (*Arcana Caelestia* 7150). And this is precisely what is meant by the Beatitude. 'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.'

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