

The Beatitudes (8)

**'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, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you '.

As the Lord taught the last of the Beatitudes He must have had in mind and foreshadowed, the privations and sufferings of the Apostles to whom He was then speaking. Indeed the real impact of what He said will surely only have registered with them years afterwards when every kind of barbarism was resorted to, to try to destroy Christianity.

But persecution is of two kinds, and both are spoken of here. Just as there were those who sought to stamp out Christianity and to destroy the bodily life of those who were Christians, so there are at all times, forces at work - forces which are working within us - endeavouring to weaken our convictions and to destroy us spiritually. Therefore we may never be in a situation of outward persecution. We may never have to face the taunts, jeers and revilings of others because of our faith, such as people have done in the past and in some parts of the world, are doing today. And yet these words of the Lord still apply to us. Our faith is still going to be tested. Our loyalty to high ideals will at times be sorely tried. We shall be incited to abandon the Lord in favour of some easier way. Persecution is not only a thing of the past or for people elsewhere. It is something which, when we understand what is meant, affects us all.

I am referring to temptation, which is none other than the opposition of our lower natures and of our evil loves and tendencies to every effort we make to uphold the Lord's teaching and to live according to it. I am referring to the forces deep within us which revile our every effort to be merciful and pure hearted, which scorn our every endeavour to be unselfish and compassionate. It is the influences from hell which are meant here, influences which are always seeking a permanent home in our lives and which mightily resist our every attempt to break free of them.

No one ever resolves to live according to some teaching of the Lord without the decision being opposed and contested in some way from within. And it does not matter what that teaching is. Indeed, the more sincere and earnest we are about it, the stronger the opposition will be, for hell doesn't want to lose its influence over us. We may, for example, resolve a greater measure of patience or tolerance, but in no time whatever, the resolution will be tested; opposition will surface, circumstances will be used to have us give way and to give in. Every stand on behalf of some truth will be opposed in this way.

And it is as well that it is. Temptation unquestionably serves a purpose. By holding on to some truth or teaching in the face of opposition mounted against it, that truth or teaching becomes firmly established in our lives. An ideal fought for is an ideal which becomes part of us. We can say we won't steal, but until we have been tempted in a situation when we could have stolen, that truth can't be said to be established in our lives. We can resolve to be more forgiving, but here again, until we have successfully come through situations which severely tried our forgiveness, it is a thing of the mind only and not of our life.

It has been aptly commented with regard to these Beatitudes which speak of persecution and tribulation, when 'we seek to enthrone the Lord Jesus Christ in His own proper Kingdom, the human soul, Self will meet mighty resistance. When we stand for truth, error with malicious intent will try to falsify it. Heaven in us meets the subtle forces of hell. The forces of the higher life, the qualities of the Kingdom of God never fight, they simply make strong impact on us, pressing for recognition and acceptance; (but) their steady pressure stimulates the evils of the lower nature, the 'natural man', into active resistance.' (Charles Hall, *The Blessed Way*, 97) This is the persecution of which these Beatitudes speak, thoughts which won't leave us alone, feelings which keep at us, trying to drag us down, reminders which keep coming at us, telling us of where we've fallen in the past. 'Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.'

In what way are temptations a cause of rejoicing? It seems incongruous to speak of this. Temptation is a serious thing, often a time of inner suffering and always associated with real anguish as we struggle towards a decision, our feelings and inclinations pulling us in one direction and our conscience in another. But the fact that there is conflict at all is itself a good thing.

It is a sign that the Lord's teachings are having some kind of impact on us and that an effort is being made. Conflict speaks of the possibility of progress being made in the establishment of the Lord's Kingdom within us. If we successfully come through it, we will have advanced forward. We can indeed, therefore, 'rejoice and be exceeding glad.'

Significantly, the Lord only spoke of persecution in the concluding Beatitudes. He earlier spoke of the graces and virtues to which He would have us aspire after and then rounded it off, so to speak, with a warning. The first seven Beatitudes speak of qualities He would have us cultivate in ourselves, humility, devoutness, meekness, desire for what is right and orderly, mercy, purity of heart, and the willingness to bring one's life into harmony with His eternal purposes for us. But these are things which cannot be achieved apart from temptation. These are characteristics which will never be established in our lives without opposition from our evil tendencies and false way of looking at things. The warning is, therefore, a necessary one. It is the Lord confronting us with the practical realities of the situation. There is no question as to the importance of those things earlier spoken of. If we are going to know a genuine sense of happiness, here is where we will find it. But temptation is involved. It is a most important factor without which the happiness and sense of blessedness of which the earlier Beatitudes speak will not be known.

It would seem at first sight that the two Beatitudes, the eighth and ninth, both concerned with persecution, are repetitive. 'Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven'. And this is followed by 'Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me.' On the surface it seems that they are both saying, if not the same then very similar things. But there is nothing in the Word of God which is said without reason. There is no wastage of words or needless repetition, not when we look within at what is spiritually meant.

Both Beatitudes speak of temptation. However temptations are of two kinds. There are temptations as to truth, or of the understanding and temptations as to good, or of the will. We can be tempted with regard to our belief and understanding of a particular truth, and we can be tempted also with regard to what we love. These temptations are in fact distinct. Their effect on us is different. One involves the understanding, the other involves the will. And this is why there are two Beatitudes on a similar subject. They seem to be saying the same thing, but this is not so.

There were only a few occasions when the Lord spoke of reward in heaven and this is one of them. In Luke 6: 35 we read, 'But love your enemies, do good to them and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great and you will be children of the Most High' And in Revelation 22, 'Look, I am coming soon! My reward is with me, and I will give to each person according to what they have done'. Such reward is nothing other than a greater sense of the presence of the Lord with us, a soul at peace, its restlessness stilled. It is the reward which awaits all who successfully endure their temptation combats.

The Swedenborg Programme – Number 140. <http://www.swedenborg.com.au>