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

**LUKE-057**. **THAT WHICH WAS LOST by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"An hundred sheep ... ten pieces of silver,... two sons."*

*Luke 15:4, 8, 11*

The immediate occasion of these three inimitable parables, which have found their way to the heart of the world, needs to be remembered in order to grasp their import and importance. They are intended to vindicate Christ's conduct in associating with outcasts and disreputable persons whom His Pharisaical critics thought a great deal too foul to be touched by clean hands. They were not meant to set forth with anything like completeness either what wanderers had to do to go back to God, or what God had done to bring wanderers back to Himself. If this had been remembered, many misconceptions, widespread and mischievous, especially affecting the meaning of the last of the three parables--that of the Prodigal Son--would have been avoided. The purpose of the parables accounts for Christ's accepting the division which His antagonists made of men, into righteous, like themselves, and unclean, like the publicans and sinners. There was a far deeper truth to be spoken about the condition of humanity than that. But for the purposes of His argument Christ passes it by. The remembrance of the intention of the parables explains their incompleteness as a statement of what people call the way of salvation. They were not meant to teach us that, but they were meant to show us that a human instinct which prizes lost things because they are lost has something corresponding to it in the divine nature, and so to vindicate the conduct of Christ.

I venture to isolate these three statements of the subjects of the parables, because I think that looking at the threefold aspect in which the one general thought is presented may help us to some useful considerations.

**I. I ask you, then, to look with me, first, at the varying causes of loss.**

The sheep was lost, the drachma was lost, the son was lost. But in each case the reason for the loss was different. Whilst I would avoid all fanciful inserting into our Lord's words of more than they can fairly bear, I would also avoid superficial evacuating them of any of their depth of significance. So I think it is not unintentional nor unimportant that in these three metaphors there are set forth three obviously distinct operative causes for man's departure from God.

The sheep did not intend to go anywhere, either to keep with or to leave the shepherd. It simply knew that grass was sweet, and that there, ahead of it, was another tuft, and it went after that. So it nibbled itself away out of the path, out of the shepherd's care, out of the flock's companionship. It was heedless; and therefore it was lost.

Now that is a fair statement of facts in regard to thousands of men, of whom I have no doubt there are some listening to me now. They do not intend any mischief, they have no purpose of rebellion or transgression, but they live what we call animal lives. The sheep knows only where the herbage is abundant and fresh: and it goes there. An animal has no foresight, and is the happier because it cannot look before and after. It has only a rudimentary conscience, if it has that. Its inclinations are restrained by no sense of obligation. Many men live just so, without restraint upon appetite, without checking of inclination, without foresight except of the material good which a certain course of conduct may get. So, all unwitting, meaning no mischief, they wander further and further from the right road, and find themselves at last in a waterless desert.

Dear friends, am I speaking to any now who have too much yielded to inclinations, who have been unwilling to look forward to the end, and ask themselves what all will come to at the last, and who scarcely know what it is to take heed unto their ways, except in so far as worldly prudence may dictate certain courses of conduct for the purpose of securing certain worldly and perishable ends? I would plead, especially with the younger portion of my congregation, to take the touching picture of this first parable as a solemn prophecy of what certainly befalls every man who sets out upon his path without careful consideration of whither it leads to at the last; and who lives for the present, in any of its forms, and who lets himself be led by inclinations or appetites. The animal does so, and, as a rule, its instincts are its sufficient guide. But you and I are blessed or cursed, as the case may be, with higher powers, which, if we do not use, we shall certainly land in the desert. If a man who is meant to guide himself by intelligence, reason, will, foresight, conscience, chooses to go down to the level of the beast, the faculties that serve the beast will not serve the man. And even the sheep is lost from the flock if it yields only to these.

But how it speaks of the Lord's tender sympathy for the wanderers that He should put in the forefront of the parables this explanation of the condition of men, and should not at first charge it upon them as sin, but only as heedlessness and folly! There is much that in itself is wrong and undesirable, the criminality of which is diminished by the fact that it was heedlessly done, though the heedlessness itself is a crime.

Now turn to the second parable. The coin was heavy, so it fell; it was round, so it rolled; it was dead, so it lay. And there are people who are things rather than persons, so entirely have they given up their wills, and so absolutely do they let themselves be determined by circumstances. It was not the drachma that lost itself, but it was the law of gravitation that lost it, and it had no power of resistance. This also is an explanation--partial, as I shall have to show you in a moment, but still real,--of a great deal of human wandering. There are masses of men who have no more power to resist the pressure of circumstances and temptations than the piece of silver had when it dropped from the woman's open palm and trundled away into some dark corner. That lightens the darkness of much of the world's sin.

But for you to abnegate the right and power of resisting circumstances is to abdicate the sovereignty with which God has crowned you. All men are shaped by externals, but the shape which the externals impose upon us is settled by ourselves. Here are two men, for instance, exposed to precisely the same conditions: but one of them yields, and is ruined; the other resists, and is raised and strengthened. As Jesus Christ, so all things have a double operation. They are either a savour of life unto life or a savour of death unto death. There is the stone. You may build upon it, or you may stumble over it: you take your choice. Here is the adverse circumstance. You may rule it, or you may let it rule you. Circumstances and outward temptations are the fool's masters, and the wise man's servants. It all depends on the set of the sail and the firmness of the hand that grasps the tiller, which way the wind shall carry the ship. The same breeze speeds vessels on directly opposite courses, and so the same circumstances may drive men in two contrary directions, sending the one further and further away from, and drawing the other nearer and nearer to, the haven of their hearts.

Dear friends, as we have to guard against the animal life of yielding to inclinations and inward impulse, of forgetting the future, and of taking no heed to our paths, so, unless we wish to ruin ourselves altogether, we have to fight against the mechanical life which, with a minimum of volition, lets the world do with us what it will. And sure I am that there are men and women in this audience at this time who have let their lives be determined by forces that have swept them away from God.

In the third parable the foolish boy had no love to his father to keep him from emigrating. He wanted to be his own master, and to get away into a place where he thought he could sow his wild oats and no news of it ever reach the father's house. He wanted to have the fingering of the money, and to enjoy the sense of possession. And so he went off on his unblessed road to the harlots and the swine's trough.

And that is no parable; that is a picture. The other two were parabolical representations; this is the thing itself. For carelessness of the bonds that knit a heart to God; hardness of an unresponsive heart unmelted by benefits; indifference to the blessedness of living by a Father's side and beneath His eye; the uprising of a desire of independence and the impatience of control; the exercise of self will--these are causes of loss that underlie the others of which I have been speaking, and which make for every one of us the essential sinfulness of our sin. It is rebellion, and it is rebellion against a Father's love.

Now, notice, that whilst the other two that we have been speaking about do partially explain the terrible fact that we go away from God, their explanation is only partial, and this grimmer truth underlies them. There are modern theories, as there were ancient ones, that say: Oh! sin is a theological bugbear. There is not any such thing. It is only indifference, ignorance, error. And then there are other theorists that say: Sin! There is no sin in following natural laws and impulses. Circumstances shape men; heredity shapes them. The notion that their actions are criminal is a mere figment of an exploded superstition.

Yes! and down below the ignorance, and inadvertence, and error, and heredity, and domination of externals, there lies the individual choice in each case. The man knows--however he sophisticates himself, or uses other people to provide him with sophistries--that he need not have done that thing unless he had chosen to do it. You cannot get beyond or argue away that consciousness. And so I say that all these immoral teachings, which are very common to-day, omit from the thing that they profess to analyse the very characteristic element of it, which is, as our Lord taught us, not the following inclination like a silly sheep; not the rolling away, in obedience to natural law, like the drachma; but the rising up of a rebellious will that desires a separation, and kicks against control, as in the case of the son.

So, dear friends, whilst I thankfully admit that much of the darkness of human conduct may be lightened by the representations of our two first parables, I cannot but feel that we have to leave to God the determination in each case of how far these have diminished individual criminality; and that we have to remember for ourselves that our departure from God is not explicable unless we recognise the fact that we have chosen rather to be away from Him than to be with Him; and that we like better to have our goods at our own disposal, and to live as it pleases ourselves.

**II. So note, secondly, the varying proportions of loss and possession.**

A hundred sheep; ten drachmas; two sons. The loss in one case is 1 per cent., a trifle; in the other case 10 per cent., more serious; in the last case 50 per cent., heartbreaking. Now, I do not suppose that our Lord intended any special significance to be attached to these varying numbers. Rather they were simply suggested by the cast of the parable in which they respectively occurred. A hundred sheep is a fair average flock; ten pieces of silver are the modest hoard of a poor woman; two sons are a family large enough to represent the contrast which is necessary to the parable. But still we may permissibly look at this varying proportion in order to see whether it, too, cannot teach us something.

It throws light upon the owner's care and pains in seeking. In one aspect, these are set forth most strikingly by the parable in which the thing lost bears the smallest proportion to the thing still retained. The shepherd might well have said: One in a hundred does not matter much. I have got the ninety and nine. But he went to look for it. But, in another aspect, the woman, of course, has a more serious loss to face, and possibly seeks with more anxiety. And when you come up to the last case, where half the household is blotted out, as it were, then we can see the depth of anxiety and pains and care which must necessarily follow.

But beyond the consideration that the ascending proportion suggests increasing pains and anxiety, there is another lesson, which seems to me even more precious, and it is this, that it matters very little to the loser how much he keeps, or what the worth of the lost thing is. There is something in human nature which makes anything that is lost precious by reason of its loss. Nobody can tell how large a space a tree fills until it is felled. If you lose one tiny stone out of a ring, or a bracelet, it makes a gap, and causes annoyance altogether disproportionate to the lustre that it had when it was there. A man loses a small portion of his fortune in some unlucky speculation, and the loss annoys him a great deal more than the possession solaced him, and he thinks more about the hundreds that have vanished than about the thousands that remain. Men are made so. It is a human instinct, that apart altogether from the consideration of its intrinsic worth, and the proportion it bears to that which is still possessed, the lost thing draws, and the loser will take any pains to find it.

So Christ says, When a woman will light a candle and sweep the house and search diligently till she finds her lost sixpence (for the drachma was worth little more), and will bring in all her neighbours to rejoice with her, that is like God; and the human instinct which prizes lost things, not because of their value, but because they are lost, has something corresponding to it in the heart of the Majesty of the heavens. It is Christ's vindication, of course, as I need not remind you, of His own conduct. He says in effect, to these Pharisees, You are finding fault with Me for doing what we all do. I am only acting in accordance with a natural human instinct; and when I thus act God Himself is acting in and through Me.

If I had time, I think I could show that this principle, brought out in my texts, really sweeps away one of the difficulties which modern science has to suggest against Evangelical Christianity. We hear it said, How can you suppose that a speck of a world like this, amidst all these flaming orbs that stud the infinite depths of the heavens, is of so much importance in God's sight that His Son came down to die for it?The magnitude of the world, as compared with others, has nothing to do with the question. God's action is determined by its moral condition. If it be true that here is sin, which rends men away from Him, and that so they are lost, then it is supremely natural that all the miracles of the Christian revelation should follow. The rationale of the Incarnation lies in this, A certain man had a hundred sheep.... One of them went astray ... and He went into the wilderness and found it.

**III. Now I meant to have said a word about the varying glimpses that we have here, into God's claims upon us, and His heart.**

Ownership is the word that describes His relation to us in the first two parables; love is the word that describes it in the third. But the ownership melts into love, because God does not reckon that He possesses men by natural right of creation or the like, unless they yield their hearts to Him, and give themselves, by their own joyful self-surrender, into His hands. But I must not be tempted to speak upon that matter; only, before I close, let me point you to that most blessed and heart-melting thought, that God accounts Himself to have lost something when a man goes away from Him.

That word the losthas another, and in some senses a more tragical, significance in Scripture. The lost are lost to themselves and to blessedness. The word implies destruction; but it also carries with it this, that God prizes us, is glad to have us, and, I was going to say, feels an incompleteness in His possessions when men depart from Him.

Oh, brethren, surely such a thought as that should melt us; and if, as is certainly the case, we have strayed away from Him into green pastures, which have ended in a wilderness, without a blade of grass; or if we have rolled away from Him in passive submission to circumstances; or if we have risen up in rebellion against Him, and claimed our separate right of possession and use of the goods that fall to us, if we would only think that He considers that He has lost us, and prizes us because we are lost to Him, and wants to get us back again, surely, surely it would draw us to Himself. Think of the greatness of the love into which the ownership is merged, as measured by the infinite price which He has paid to bring us back, and let us all say, I will arise and go to my Father.