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

**LUKE-062**. **THE GAINS OF THE FAITHFUL STEWARD by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"If ye have not been faithful in that which is another man's, who shall give you that which is your own?"*

*Luke 16:12*

In a recent sermon on this context I dealt mainly with the threefold comparison which our Lord runs between the higher and the lower kind of riches. The one is stigmatised as that which is least, the unrighteous mammon, that which is another's; whilst the higher is magnified as being that which is most, the true riches, your own. What are these two classes? On the one hand stand all possessions which, in and after possession, remain outside of a man, which may survive whilst he perishes, or perish while he survives. On the other hand are the riches which pass into him, and become inseparable from him. Noble aims, high aspirations, pure thoughts, treasures of wisdom, treasures of goodness--these are the real wealth corresponding to man's nature, destined for his enrichment, and to last with him for ever. But we may gather the whole contrast into two words: the small, the unrighteous, the wealth which being mine is not mine but remains another's, and foreign to me, is the world. The great riches, the true riches, the good destined for me, and for which I am destined, is God. In these two words you have the antithesis, the real antithesis, God versus the world.

**I. Now let us turn rather to the principle which our Lord here lays down, in reference to these two classes of good, or of possessions.**

He tells us that the faithful use of the world helps us to the possession of God; or, to put it into other words, that how we handle money and what money can buy, has a great deal to do with our religious enjoyment and our religious life, and that that is true, both in regard to our partial possession of God here and now, and to our perfect possession of Him in the world to come.

Now I wish to say one or two very plain things about this matter, and I hope that you will not turn away from them because they are familiar and trite. Considering how much of your lives, especially as regards men of business, is taken up with money, its acquisition, its retention, its distribution, there are few things that have more to do with the vigour or feebleness of your Christian life than the way in which you handle these perishable things.

I wish to say a word or two, first, about I. What our Lord means by this faithfulness to which He attaches such tremendous issues.

Now, you will remember, that the starting point of my text is that parable of the unjust steward, whose conduct, knavish as it was, is in some sense presented by our Lord to His disciples, and to us, as a pattern. But my text, and the other two verses which are parallel with it, seem to have amongst their other purposes this: to put in a caveat against supposing that it is the unfaithfulness of the steward which is recommended for our imitation. And so the first point that is suggested in regard to this matter of faithfulness about the handling of outward good is that we have to take care that it is rightly acquired, for though the unjust steward was commended for the prudent use that he made of dishonestly acquired gain, it is the prudent use, and not the manner of the acquisition which we are to take as our examples. Initial unfaithfulness in acquisition is not condoned or covered over by any pious and benevolent use hereafter. Mediaeval barons left money for masses. Plenty of Protestants do exactly the same thing. Brewers will build cathedrals, and found picture galleries, and men that have made their money foully will fancy that they atone for that by leaving it for some charitable purpose. The caustic but true wit of a Scottish judge said about a great bequest which was supposed to be--whether rightly or wrongly, I know not--of that sort, that it was the heaviest fire insurance premium that had been paid in the memory of man. The money does not stink, said the Roman Emperor, about the proceeds of an unsavoury tax. But the money unfaithfully won does stink when it is thrown into God's treasury. The price of a dog shall not come into the sanctuary of the Lord. Do not think that money doubtfully won is consecrated by being piously spent.

But there are more things than that here, for our Lord sums up the whole of a Christian man's duties in regard to the use of this external world and all its good, in that one word faithful, which implies discharge of responsibility, recognition of obligation, the continual consciousness that we are not proprietors but stewards. Unless we carry that consciousness with us into all the phases of our connection with perishable goods they become--as I shall have to show you in a moment,--hindrances instead of helps to our possession of God.

I am not going to talk revolutionary socialism, or anything of that sort, but I am bound to reiterate my own solemn conviction that until, practically as well as theoretically, the Christian Church in all its branches brings into its creed, and brings out in its practice, the great thought of stewardship, especially in regard to material and external good, but also in regard to the durable riches of salvation, the nations will be full of unrest, and thunder-clouds heavily boding storm and destruction will lower on the horizon. What we have, we have that we may impart; what we have in all forms of having, we have because we have received. We are distributing centres, that is all--I was going to say like a nozzle, perforated with many holes, at the end of the spout of a watering-can. That is a Christian man's relation to his possessions. We are stewards. It is required in stewards that a man be found faithfulNow let me ask you to notice--

**II. The bearing of this faithfulness in regard to the lower wealth on our possession of the higher.**

Jesus says in this context, twice over, that faithfulness with regard to the former is the condition of our being entrusted with the latter. Now, remember, by way of illustration of this thought, what all this outward world of goodness and beauty is mainly meant for. What? It is all but scaffolding by which, and within the area of which, the building may arise. The meaning of the world is to make character. All that we have, aye! and all that we do, and the whole of the events and circumstances with which we come in contact here on earth, are then lifted to their noblest function, and are then understood in their deepest meaning when we look upon them as we do upon the leaping-poles and bars and swings of a gymnasium,--as meant to develop thews and muscles, and make men of us. That is what they are here for, and that is what we are here for. Not enjoyment, and not sorrow, except in so far as these two are powers in developing character, not plunging ourselves in the enjoyments of sense. Wealth and poverty, gain and loss, love gratified and love marred, possessions sweet, when preserved, and possessions that become sweeter by being removed; all these are simply meant as whetstones on which the keen blade may be sharpened, as forces against which, trying ourselves, our deftness and strength may be increased. They are all meant to make us men, and if we faithfully use these externals with a recognition of their source, with a wise estimate of their subordination so as that our desires shall not cleave to them solely, and with a fixed determination to use them as ministers to make ourselves nobler, wiser, stronger, liker to God and His Christ, then the world will minister to our possession of God, and being faithful in that which is least, we shall thereby be more capable of receiving that which is greatest. But if, on the other hand, we so forget our true wealth, and become so besotted and absorbed in our adhesion to, and our desires after, fleeting good, then the capacities that were noble will fade and shrivel, being unused; aims and purposes that were elevated and pure will die out unsatisfied; windows in our souls which commanded a wide, glorious prospect will gradually be bricked up; burdens which hinder our running will be piled upon our backs, and the world will have conquered us, whilst we are dreaming that we have conquered the world. You look at a sea anemone in a pool on the rocks when the tide is out, all its tendrils outstretched, and its cavity wide open. Some little bit of seaweed, or some morsel of half-putrefying matter, comes in contact with it, and instantly every tentacle is retracted, and the lips are tightly closed, so that you could not push a bristle in. And when your tentacles draw themselves in to clutch the little portion of worldly good, of whatever sort it is, that has come into your hold, there is no room to get God in there, and being unfaithful in that which is leastyou have made it impossible that you should possess that which is most. Ah! there are some of us that were far better Christians long ago, when we were poorer men, than we are to-day, and there are some of us that know what it is to have the heart so filled with baser liquors that there is no room for the ethereal nectar. If the world has filled my soul, where is God to dwell?

There is another way in which we may look at this matter. I have said that the main use of these perishable and fragmentary good things around us is to develop character, by our administration of them. Another way of putting the same thought is that their main use is to show us God. If we faithfully use the lesser good it will become transparent, and reveal to us the greater. We hear a great deal about deepening the spiritual life by prayers, and conventions, and Bible readings and the like. I have no word to say except in full sympathy with all such. But I do believe that the best means, the most powerful means, by which the great bulk of Christian men could deepen their spiritual lives would be a more honest and thoroughgoing attempt to be faithful in that which is least. We have so much to do with it necessarily, that few, if any, things have more power in shaping our whole characters than our manner of administering the wealth, the material good, that comes to our hands.

And so, dear brethren, I beseech you remember that the laws of perspective are such as that a minute thing near at hand shuts out the vision of a mighty thing far off, and a hillock by my side will hide the Himalayas at a distance, and a sovereign may block out God; and that which is leasthas the diabolical power of seeming greater to us than, and of obscuring our vision of, that which is most.

May I remind you that all these thoughts about the bearing of faithfulness in administering the lower of our possessions, on the attainment of higher, apply to us whatever be the amount of these outward goods that we have? I suppose there were not twelve poorer men in all Palestine that day than the twelve to whom my text was originally addressed. Three of them had left their nets and their fishing-boats, one of them we know had left his counting-house, as a publican, and all his receipts and taxes behind him. What they had we know not, but at all events they were the poor of this world. Do not any of you that happen to be modestly or poorly off think that my sermon is a sermon for rich men. It is not what we have, but how we handle it, that is in question. The cares of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches, were bracketed together by Jesus Christ as the things that choke the word, and make it unfruitful. The poor man who wants, and the rich man who uses unfaithfully, are alike hit by the words of my text.

Now, further, let me ask you to look at,

**III. The bearing of faithfulness in this life on the fuller possession of our true riches in the life hereafter.**

There lies under this whole context a striking conception of life here in its relation to the life hereafter, A father sets his son, or a master sets his apprentice, to some small task, an experiment made upon a comparatively worthless body, supplies him with material which it does not much matter whether he spoils or not, and then if by practice the hand becomes deft, he is set to better work. God sets us to try our prentice hands here in the world, and if we administer that rightly, not necessarily perfectly, but so as to show that there are the makings of a good workman in us by His gracious help, then the next life comes, with its ampler margin, with its wider possibilities, with its nobler powers, and there we are set to use in loftier fashion the powers which we made our own being here. Thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things.

I have said that the great use of the world and all its wealth is to make character. I have said that that character determines our capacity for the possession of God. I have said that our administration of worldly wealth is one chief factor in determining our character. Now I say that that character persists. There are great changes, changes the significance and the scope and the consequences of which we can never know here. But the man remains, in the main direction of his being, in the character which he has made for himself by his use of God's world and of Christ's Spirit. And so the way in which we handle the trivialities and temporalities here has eternal consequences. We sit in a low room with the telegraph instrument in front of us, and we click off our messages, and they are recorded away yonder, and we shall have to read them one day. Transient causes produce permanent effects. The seas which laid down the great sandstone deposits that make so large a portion of the framework of this world have long since evaporated. But the footprints of the seabird that stalked across the moist sand, and the little pits made by the raindrops that fell countless millenniums ago on the red ooze, are there yet, and you may see them in our museums. And so our faithfulness, or our unfaithfulness, here has made the character which is eternal, and on which will depend whether we shall, in the joys of that future life, possess God in fullness, or whether we shall lose Him, as our portion and our Friend.

Now, dear brethren, do not forget that all this that I have been saying is the second page in Christ's teaching; and the first page is an entirely different one. I have been saying that we make character, and that character determines our possession of God and His grace. But there is another thing to be said. The central thought of Christ's gospel is that God, in His sweetness, in His pardoning mercy, in His cleansing Spirit, is given to the very men whose characters do not deserve it. And the same Lord who said, If ye have not been faithful in that which is least, who shall give you that which is greatest?says also from the heavens, I counsel thee to buy of Me gold tried in the fire, that thou mayest be rich. My text, and the principle that is involved in it, do not contradict the great truth that we are saved by simple faith, however unworthy we are. That is the message to begin with. And unless you have received it you are not standing in the place where the message that I have been insisting upon has a personal bearing on you. But if you have taken Christ for your salvation, remember, Christian brother and sister, that it is not the same thing in regard either to your Christian life on earth, or to your heavenly glory, whether you have been living faithfully as stewards in your handling of earth's perishable good, or whether you have clung to it as your real portion, have used it selfishly, and by it have hidden God from your hearts. To Christian men is addressed the charge that we trust not in the uncertainty of riches, but in the living God, and that we be rich in good works, ready to distribute, willing to communicate, that we lay up in store for ourselves a good foundation against the time to come; and so lay hold on the life that is life indeed.