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

**JOHN-029**. **FRAGMENTS OR BROKEN PIECES by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"When they were filled, He said unto His disciples, Gather up the fragments that remain, that nothing be lost."*

*John 6:12*

The Revised Version correctly makes a very slight, but a very significant change in the words of this verse. Instead of fragmentsit reads broken pieces. The change seems very small, but the effect of it is considerable. It helps our picture of the scene by correcting a very common misapprehension as to what it was which the Apostles are bid to gather up. The general notion, I suppose, is that the fragmentsare the crumbs that fell from each man's hands, as he ate, and the picture before the imagination of the ordinary reader is that of the Apostlescarefully collecting the debris of the meal from the grass where it had dropped. But the true notion is that the broken pieces which remain overare the unused portions into which our Lord's miracle-working hand had broken the bread, and the true picture is that of the Apostles carefully putting away in store for future use the abundant provision which their Lord had made, beyond the needs of the hungry thousands. And that conception of the command teaches far more beautiful and deeper lessons than the other.

For if the common translation and notion be correct, all that is taught us, or at least what is principally taught us, is the duty of thrift and careful economy; whereas the other shows more clearly that what is taught us is that Jesus Christ always gets ready for His people something over and above the exact limits of their bare need at the moment, that He prepares for His poor and hungry dependants in royal fashion, leaving ever a wide margin of difference between what would be just enough to keep the life in them, and His liberal housekeeping. Further, we are taught a lesson of wise husbandry and economy in the use of that overplus of grace which Christ ministers, and are instructed that the laws of prudent thrift have as honoured a place in the management of spiritual as of temporal wealth. Gather up, says our Lord, the pieces which I broke, the large provision which I made for possible wants. My gifts are in excess of the requirements of the moment. Take care of them till you need them. That is a worthier interpretation of His command than one which merely sees in it an exhortation to thrifty taking care of the crumbs that fell from the lips of the hungry eaters.

Looking at this command, then, with this slight alteration of rendering, and consequent widening of scope, we may briefly try to gather up the lessons which it obviously suggests.

**I. We have that thought, to which I have already referred, as more strikingly brought out by the slight alteration of translation, which, by the use of broken pieces, suggests the connection with Christ's breaking the loaves and fishes.**

We are taught to think of the large surplus in Christ's gifts over and above our need. Our Lord has Himself given us a commentary upon this miracle. All Christ's miracles are parables, for all teach us, on the level of natural and outward things, lessons that are true in regard to the spiritual world; but this one is especially symbolical, as indeed are all these recorded in John's Gospel. And here we have Christ, on the day after the miracle, commenting upon it in His long and profound discourse upon the Bread of Life, which plainly intimates that He meant His office of feeding the hungry crowds, with bread supernaturally increased by the touch of His hand, to be but a picture and a guide which might lead to the apprehension of the higher view of Himself as the bread of God which came down from heaven, feeding and giving life to the worldby His broken body and shed blood.

So that we are not inventing a fanciful interpretation of an incident not meant to have any meaning deeper than shows on the surface, when we say that the abundance far beyond what the eaters could make use of at the moment really represented the large surplus of inexhaustible resources and unused grace which is treasured for us all in Christ Jesus. Whom He feeds He feasts. His gifts answer our need, and over-answer it, for He is able to do exceeding abundantly above that which we ask or think, and neither our conceptions, nor our petitions, nor our present powers of receiving, are the real limits of the illimitable grace that is laid up for us in Christ, and which, potentially, we have each of us in our hands whenever we lay our hands on Him.

Oh, dear friends! what you and I have ever had and felt of Christ's power, sweetness, preciousness, and love is as nothing compared with the infinite depths of all those which lie in Him. The sea fills the little creeks along its shore, but it rolls in unfathomed depths, boundless to the horizon away out there in the mid-Atlantic. And all the present experience of all Christian people, of what Christ is, is like the experience of the first settlers in some great undiscovered continent; who timidly plant a little fringe of population round its edge and grow their scanty crops there, whilst the great prairies of miles and miles, with all their wealth and fertility, are lying untrodden and unknown in the heart of the untraversed continent. The most powerful telescope leaves nebulae unresolved, which, though they seem but a dim dust of light, are all ablaze with mighty suns. The goodnesswhich He has wrought before the sons of men for them that fearHim is, as the Psalmist adoringly exclaims, wondrously great, but still greater is that which the same verse of the Psalm celebrates--the goodness which He has laid up for them that fear Him. The gold which is actually coined and passing from hand to hand, is but a fraction, a mere scale, as it were, off the surface of the great uncoined mass of bullion that lies stored in the vaults there. Christ is a great deal more than any man, or than all men, have yet found Him to be. Gather up the broken pieces; and see that nothing of that infinite preciousness of His be lost by us.

**II. Then there is another very simple lesson which I draw. This command suggests for us Christ's thrift (if I may use the word) in the employment of His miraculous power.**

Surely they might have said: If thou canst multiply five loaves into all this abundance, why should we be trudging about, each with a basket on his back full of bread, when we have with us He whose word can make it for us at any moment?Yes, but a law which characterises all the miraculous, in both the Old and the New Testament, and which broadly distinguishes Christ's miracles from all the false miracles of false religions is this, that the miraculous is pared down to the smallest possible amount, that not one hairsbreadth beyond the necessity shall be done by miracle; that whatever men can do they shall do; that their work shall stop as late, and begin again as soon as possible. Thus, though Christ was going to raise Lazarus, men's hands had to roll away the stone; and when Christ had raised Lazarus, men's hands had to loose the napkins from his face. And though Christ was able to say to the daughter of Jairus, Talitha cumi!(damsel, arise!) His next word was: Give her something to eat. Where the miraculous was needed it was used, and not a hairsbreadth beyond absolute necessity did it extend.

And so here Christ multiplies the bread, and yet each of the Apostles has to take a basket, probably some kind of woven wicker-work article which they would carry for holding their little necessaries in their peregrinations; each Apostle has to take his basket, and perhaps emptying it of some of his humble apparel, to fill it with these bits of bread; for Christ was not going to work miracles where men's thrift and prudence could be employed.

Nor does He do so now. We live by faith, and our dependence on Him can never be too absolute. Only laziness sometimes dresses itself in the garb and speaks with the tongue of faith, and pretends to be truthful when it is only slothful. Why criest thou unto Me?said God to Moses, speak unto the children of Israel that they go forward. True faith sets us to work. It is not to be perverted into idle and false depending upon Him to work for us, when by the use of our own ten fingers and our own brains, guided and strengthened by His working in us, we can do the work that is set before us.

**III. Still further, there is another lesson here. Not only does the injunction show us Christ's thrift in the employment of the supernatural, but it teaches us our duty of thrift and care in the use of the spiritual grace bestowed upon us.**

These men had given to them this miraculously made bread; but they had to exercise ordinary thrift in the preservation of the supernatural gift. Christ has been given to you by the most stupendous miracle that ever was or can be wrought, and if you are Christian people, you have the Spirit of Christ given to you, to dwell in your hearts, to make you wise and fair, gentle and strong, and altogether Christlike. But you have to take care of these gifts. You have to exercise the common virtues of economy and thrift in your use of the divine gifts as in your use of the common things of daily life. You have to use wisely and not waste the Bread of God that came down from heaven, or that Bread of God will not feed you. You have to provide the basket in which to carry the unexhausted residue of the divine gift, or you may stand hungry in the very midst of plenty, and whilst within arm's length of you there is bread enough and to spare to feed the whole world.

The lesson of my text, which is most eminently brought out if we adopt the translation which I have referred to at the beginning of these remarks, is, then, just this: Christian men, be watchful stewards of that great gift of a living Christ, the food of your souls, that has been by miracle bestowed upon you. Such gathering together for future need of the unused residue of grace may be accomplished by three ways. First, there must be a diligent use of the grace given. See that you use to the very full, in the measure of your present power of absorbing and your present need, the gift bestowed upon you. Be sure that you take in as much of Christ as you can contain before you begin to think of what to do with the overplus. If we are not careful to take what we can, and to use what we need, of Christ, there is little chance of our being faithful stewards of the surplus. The water in a mill-stream runs over the trough in great abundance when the wheel is not working, and one reason why so many Christians seem to have so much more given to them in Christ than they need is because they are doing no work to use up the gift.

A second essential to such stewardship is the careful guarding of the grace given from whatever would injure it. Let not worldliness, business, cares of the world, the sorrows of life, its joys, duties, anxieties or pleasures--let not these so come into your hearts that they will elbow Christ out of your hearts, and dull your appetite for the true Bread that came down from heaven.

And lastly, not only by use and by careful guarding, but also by earnest desire for larger gifts of the Christ who is large beyond all measure, shall we receive more and more of His sweetness and His preciousness into our hearts, and of His beauty and glory into our transfigured characters. The basket that we carry, this recipient heart of ours, is elastic. It can stretch to hold any amount that you like to put into it. The desire for more of Christ's grace will stretch its capacity, and as its capacity increases the inflowing gift greatens, and a larger Christ fills the larger room of my poor heart.

So the lesson is taught us of our prudence in the care and use of the grace bestowed on us, and we are bidden to cherish a happy confidence in the inexhaustible resources of Christ, and the continual gift in the future of even larger measures of grace, which are all ours already, given to us at the first reception of Him into our hearts, and only needing our faithfulness to be growingly ours in experience as they are ours from the first in germ.

**IV. Finally, a solemn warning is implied in this command, and its reason that nothing be lost.**

Then there is a possibility of losing the gift that is freely given to us. We may waste the bread, and so, sometime or other when we are hungry, awake to the consciousness that it has dropped out of our slack hands. The abundance of Christ's grace may, so far as you are profited or enriched by it, be like the unclaimed millions of money which nobody asks for and that is of use to no living soul. You may be paupers while all God's riches in glory are at your disposal, and starving while baskets full of bread broken for us by Christ lie unused at our sides. Some of us have never tasted the sweetness or been fed by the nutritiousness of that Bread of God which came down from heaven. And more marvellous still, there may be some of us, who having come to Christ hungry and been fed by Him, have ceased to care for the pure nourishment and taste for the manna, and are turning again with gross appetite to the husks in the swine's trough. Negligent Christians! worldly Christians! you who care more for money and other dainties and delights which perish with the using-- backsliding Christians, who once hungered and thirsted for more of Christ, and now have no longing for Him--awake to the danger in which you stand of letting all your spiritual wealth slip through your fingers; behold the treasures, yet unreached, within your grasp, and seek to garner and realise them. Gather up the broken pieces which remain over, lest everything be lost.