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

**LUKE-017**. **BLASPHEMER, OR - WHO? by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"17. And it came to pass on a certain day, as He was teaching, that there were Pharisees and doctors of the law sitting by, which were come out of every town of Galilee, and Judea, and Jerusalem; and the power of the Lord was present to heal them. 18. And, behold, men brought in a bed a man which was taken with a palsy: and they sought means to bring him in, and to lay him before Him. 19. And when they could not find by what way they might bring him in because of the multitude, they went upon the house-top, and let him down through the tiling, with his couch, into the midst before Jesus. 20. And when He saw their faith, He said unto him, Man, thy sins are forgiven thee. 21. And the scribes and the Pharisees began to reason, saying, Who is this which speaketh blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God alone? 22. But when Jesus perceived their thoughts, He, answering, said unto them, What reason ye in your hearts? 23. Whether is easier to say, Thy sins be forgiven thee; or to say, Rise up and walk! 24. But that ye may know that the Son of man hath power upon earth to forgive sins, (He said unto the sick of the palsy,) I say unto thee, Arise, and take up thy couch, and go unto thine house. 25. And immediately he rose up before them, and took up that whereon he lay, and departed to his own house, glorifying God. 26. And they were all amazed, and they glorified God, and were filled with fear, saying, We have seen strange things to-day."*

*Luke 5:17-26*

Luke describes the composition of the unfriendly observers in this crowd with more emphasis and minuteness than the other Evangelists do. They were Pharisees and doctors, and they were assembled from every part of Galilee, and even from Judea, and, what was most remarkable, from Jerusalem itself. Probably the conflict with the authorities in the capital recorded in John v. had taken place by this time, and if so, a deputation from the Sanhedrim would very naturally be despatched to Capernaum, and its members would as naturally summon the local lights to sit with them, and watch this revolutionary young teacher, who had no licence from them, and apparently not much reverence for them.

One can easily imagine that these heresy-hunters would be much too superior persons to mix with the crowd about the door of Peter's house, and would, as Luke says, be sitting by, near enough to see and hear, but far enough to show that they had no share in the vulgar enthusiasm of these provincial peasants. They were too holy to mingle with the mob, so they kept together by themselves, and waited hopefully for some heresy or breach of their multitudinous precepts. They got more than they expected.

We may note the contrast between their cynical watchfulness and the glorious manifestations for which they had no eyes. The power of the Lord--that is, of Christ--was(operative) in His healing, or, according to another reading, to heal them. But the critics took no heed of that. There is a temper of mind which is sharp-eyed as a lynx for faults, and blind as a bat to evidences of divine power in the Gospel or its adherents. Some noses are keen to smell stenches, and dull to perceive fragrance. The race of such inquisitors is not extinct.

They contrast, too, with the earnestness of the four friends who brought the paralysed man. The former sat cool and critical, because they had no sense of need either for themselves or for others. The latter made all the effort they could to fight through the crowd, and then took to the roof by some outside stair, and hastily stripping off enough of the tiling, lowered their friend, bed and all, right down in front of the young Rabbi. The house would be low, and the roof slight, and Jesus was probably seated in an open inner court or verandah, At any rate, the description gives a piece of local colour, and presents no improbability.

Earnestness in striving to come oneself or to bring a dear one to Christ's feet seems a supremely absurd waste of energy to a cynical critic, who feels no need of anything that Christ can give. It looks rather different to the paralytic on his couch, and to the friends who long for his healing.

The first lesson from this incident is that our deepest need is forgiveness. No doubt, something in the paralytic's case determined Christ's method with him. Perhaps his sickness had been brought on by dissipation, and possibly conscience was lashing him with a whip of scorpions, so that, while his friends sought for his healing, he himself was more anxious for pardon. It is very unlikely that Jesus would have offered forgiveness unless He had known that it was yearned for. But whether that is so or not, we may fairly generalise the order of givings in this miracle, and draw from it the lesson that what Jesus then gave first is His chief gift. In most of His other miracles He gave bodily healing first. First or second, it is always Christ's chief gift in the beginning of discipleship. His miracles of bodily healing are parables of that higher miracle. This incident brings out what is always the order of relative importance, whether it is that of chronological sequence or not.

And we all need to lay that truth to heart for ourselves. No tinkering with superficial discomforts, or culture of intellect and taste, or success in worldly pursuits, will avail to stanch the deep wound through which our life-blood is ebbing out. We need something that goes deeper than all these styptics. Only a power which can deal with our sense of sin, and soothe that into blessed assurance of pardon, is strong enough to grapple with our true root of misery. It is useless to give a man dying of cancer medicine for pimples. That is what all attempts to make man happy and restful while sin remains unforgiven, are doing.

Social reformers need this lesson. Many voices proclaim many gospels to-day. Culture, economical or social reconstruction, is trumpeted as the panacea. But it matters comparatively little how society is organised. If its individual members retain their former natures, the former evils will come back, whatever its organisation. The only thorough cure for social evils is individual regeneration. Christ deals with men singly, and remoulds society by renewing the individual. The most elaborate machinery may be used for filtering the black waters. What will be the good of that if the fountain of blackness is not sealed up, or rather purified, at its hidden source? Make the tree good, and its fruit will be good. To make the tree good, you must begin with dealing with sin.

The second lesson from this incident is that Christ's claim to forgive sins is either blasphemy or the manifest token of divinity. These Pharisees scented heresy at once. They were blind to the pathos of the story, and hard as millstones towards the poor sufferer's wistful looks. But they pounced at once gleefully on Christ's words. They were perfectly right in their premises that forgiveness was a divine prerogative which no man could share. For sin is the name of evil, when considered in its relation to God. He only can forgive it, for against Thee, Thee only, as David confessed, is it committed. True, the same act may be full of harmful results to men, and may be a breach of human law, but in its character as sin it refers to God only. Forgiveness is the outpouring of God's love on a sinner, uninterrupted by his sin. Only God can pour out that love.

But the cavillers were quite wrong in their conclusion. He did not blaspheme. The fact that Jesus knew and answered their whispered or unspoken reasonings in their heartsmight have taught them that here was more than a rabbi, or even a prophet. But He goes on to reiterate His assertion that He has power to forgive sins.

Observe that He does not deny their premises. Nor does He, as He was bound in common honesty to do, set them right if they were wrong in supposing that He had claimed divine power. A wise religious teacher, who saw himself misunderstood as asserting that he could give what he only meant to assure a penitent that God would give, would have instantly said, Do not mistake me. I am only doing what every servant of God's should and can do, telling this poor brother that God is ready to forgive. God forbid that I should be supposed to do more than to declare his forgiveness!Christ's answer is the strongest possible contrast to that. He knew what these Pharisees supposed Him to have meant by His authoritative words, and knowing it, He repeats them, and points to the miracle about to be done as their vindication.

Is there any possible way of escaping from the conclusion that Jesus solemnly and deliberately laid claim to exercise the divine prerogative of dispensing pardon? If He did, what shall we say of Him? Surely there is no third judgment of Him and His words possible; but either the Pharisees were right, and this man, this pattern of all meekness and perfect example of humility, blasphemed, or else Peter was right when he said, Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God.

The third lesson is that the visible effects of Christ's power attest the reality of His claim to produce the invisible effects of peaceful assurance of forgiveness. It was equally easy to say, Thy sins are forgiven thee, and to say, Take up thy bed and walk. It was equally impossible for a mere man to forgive, and to give the paralytic muscular force to move. But the one saying could be tested, and its fulfilment verified by sight. The other could not; but if the visible impossibility was done, it was a witness that the invisible one could be.

The striking way in which our Lord weaves in His command to the palsied man to take up his bed with His words to the Pharisees is preserved in all the Gospels, and gives vividness to the narrative, while it brings out the main purpose of the miracle. It was a demonstration in the visible sphere of Christ's power in the invisible. Both were divine acts, and that which could be verified by sight established the reality of that which could not.

The same principle may be widely extended. It includes all the outward effects of Christ's gospel in the world. There are abundance of these which are patent to fair-minded observers. If one wishes to know what these are, he has only to contrast heathen lands with those in which, however imperfectly, Jesus is recognised as King and Example. The lives of His disciples are full of faults, but they should, and in a measure, do, witness to the reality of His gifts of forgiveness and conquest of sin. He has done more to restore strength to humanity paralysed for good than all other would-be physicians put together have done; and since He has visibly effected such manifest changes on outward lives, it is no rash conclusion to draw that He can change the inward nature. If He has healed the palsy, that is a work surpassing human power, and it proves that He can forgive the sin which brought the paralysis, and tied the helpless sufferer to his couch of pain.