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

**LUKE-026**. **THE TWO DEBTORS by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"41. There was a certain creditor which had two debtors; the one owed five hundred pence, and the other fifty. 42. And when they had nothing to pay, he frankly forgave them both. Tell Me therefore, which of them will love him most? 43. Simon answered and said, I suppose that he to whom he forgave most."*

*Luke 7:41-43*

We all know the lovely story in which this parable is embedded. A woman of notoriously bad character had somehow come in contact with Jesus Christ, and had by Him been aroused from her sensuality and degradation, and calmed by the assurance of forgiveness. So, when she heard that He was in her own town, what could she do but hasten to the Pharisee's house, and brave the cruel, scornful eyes of the eminently respectable people that would meet her there? She carries with her part of the spoils and instruments of her sinful adornment, to devote it to His service; but before she can open the cruse, her heart opens, and the hot tears flow on His feet, inflicting an indignity where she had meant an honour. She has nothing at hand to repair the fault, she will not venture to take her poor garment, which might have done it, but with a touch, she loosens her long hair, and with the ingenuity and self-abasement of love, uses that for a towel. Then, gathering confidence from her reception, and carried further than she had meant, she ventures to lay her sinful lips on His feet, as if asking pardon for the tears that would come--the only lips, except those of the traitor, that are recorded as having touched the Master. And only then does she dare to pour upon Him her only wealth.

What says the Pharisee? Has he a heart at all? He is scandalised at such a scene at his respectable table; and no wonder, for he could not have known that a change had passed upon the woman, and her evil repute was obviously notorious. He does not wonder at her having found her way into his house, for the meal was half public. But he began to doubt whether a Man who tolerates such familiarities from such a person could be a prophet; or if He were, whether He could be a good man. He would have known her if He had been a prophet, thinks he. The thought is only a questionably true one. If He had known her, He would have thrust her back with His foot, he thinks; and that thought is obviously false. But Simon's righteousness was of the sort that gathers up its own robes about it, and shoves back the poor sinner into the filth. She is a sinner, says he. No, Simon! she was a sinner, but she is a penitent, and is on the road to be a saint, and having been washed, she is a great deal cleaner than thou art, who art only white-washed.

Our Lord's parable is the answer to the Pharisee's thought, and in it Jesus shows Simon that He knows him and the woman a great deal better than he did. There are three things to which briefly I ask your attention--the common debt, in varying amounts; the common insolvency; and the love, like the debt, varying in amount. Now, note these things in order.

**I. There is, first of all, the common debt.**

I do not propose to dwell at all upon that familiar metaphor, familiar to us all from its use in the Lord's Prayer, by which sin and the guilt of sin are shadowed forth for us in an imperfect fashion by the conception of debt. For duty neglected is a debt to God, which can only be discharged by a penalty. And all sin, and its consequent guilt and exposure to punishment, may be regarded under the image of indebtedness.

But the point that I want you to notice is that these two in our parable, though they are meant to be portraits of Simon and the woman, are also representatives of the two classes to one or other of which we all belong. They are both debtors, though one owes but a tenth of what the other does. That is to say, our Lord here draws a broad distinction between people who are outwardly respectable, decent, cleanly living, and people who have fallen into the habit, and are living a life, of gross and open transgression. There has been a great deal of very pernicious loose representation of the attitude of Christianity in reference to this matter, common in evangelical pulpits. And I want you to observe that our Lord draws a broad line and says, Yes! you, Simon, are a great deal better than that woman was. She was coarse, unclean, her innocence gone, her purity stained. She had been wallowing in filth, and you, with your respectability, your rigid morality, your punctilious observance of the ordinary human duties, you were far better than she was, and had far less to answer for than she had. Fifty is only a tenth of five hundred, and there is a broad distinction, which nothing ought to be allowed to obliterate, between people who, without religion, are trying to do right, to keep themselves in the paths of morality and righteousness, to discharge their duty to their fellows, controlling their passions and their flesh, and others who put the reins upon the necks of the horses and let them carry them where they will, and live in an eminent manner for the world and the flesh and the devil. And there is nothing in evangelical Christianity which in the smallest degree obliterates that distinction, but rather it emphasises it, and gives a man full credit for any difference that there is in his life and conduct and character between himself and the man of gross transgression.

But then it says, on the other side, the difference which does exist, and is not to be minimised, is, after all, a difference of degree. They are both debtors. They stand in the same relation to the creditor, though the amount of the indebtedness is extremely different. We are all sinful men, and we stand in the same relation to God, though one of us may be much darker and blacker than the other.

And then, remember, that when you begin to talk about the guilt of actions in God's sight, you have to go far below the mere surface. If we could see the infinite complexity of motives--aggravations on the one side and palliations on the other--which go to the doing of a single deed, we should not be so quick to pronounce that the publican and the harlot are worse than the Pharisee. It is quite possible that an action which passes muster in regard to the morality of the world may, if regard be had (which God only can exercise) to the motive for which it is done, be as bad as, if not worse than, the lust and the animalism, drunkenness and debauchery, crime and murder, which the vulgar scales of the world consider to be the heavier. If you once begin to try to measure guilt, you will have to pass under the surface appearance, and will find that many a white and dazzling act has a very rotten inside, and that many a very corrupt and foul one does not come from so corrupt a source as at first sight might seem to be its origin. Let us be very modest in our estimate of the varying guilt of actions, and remember that, deep down below all diversities, there lies a fundamental identity, in which there is no difference, that all of us respectable people that never broke a law of the nation, and scarcely ever a law of propriety, in our lives, and the outcasts, if there are any here now, the drunkards, the sensualists, all of us stand in this respect in the same class. We are all debtors, for we have all sinned and come short of the glory of God, A viper an inch long and the thickness of whipcord has a sting and poison in it, and is a viper. And if the question is whether a man has got small-pox or not, one pustule is as good evidence as if he was spotted all over. So, remember, he who owes five hundred and he who owes the tenth part of it, which is fifty, are both debtors.

**II. Now notice the common insolvency.**

They had nothing to pay. Well, if there is no money, no effectsin the bank, no cash in the till, nothing to distrain upon, it does not matter very much what the amount of the debt is, seeing that there is nothing to meet it, and whether it is fifty or five hundred the man is equally unable to pay. And that is precisely our position.

I admit, of course, that men without any recognition of God's pardoning mercy, or any of the joyful impulse that comes from the sense of Christ's redemption, or any of the help that is given by the indwelling of the Spirit who sanctifies may do a great deal in the way of mending their characters and making themselves purer and nobler. But that is not the point which my text contemplates, because it deals with a past. And the fact that lies under the metaphor of my text is this, that none of us can in any degree diminish our sin, considered as a debt to God. What can you and I do to lighten our souls of the burden of guilt? What we have written we have written. Tears will not wash it out, and amendment will not alter the past, which stands frowning and irrevocable. If there be a God at all, then our consciences, which speak to us of demerit, proclaim guilt in its two elements--the sense of having done wrong, and the foreboding of punishment therefor. Guilt cannot be dealt with by the guilty one: it must be Some One else who deals with it. He, and only He against whom we have sinned, can touch the great burden that we have piled upon us.

Brother! we have nothing to pay. We may mend our ways; but that does not touch the past. We may hate the evil; that will help to keep us from doing it in the future, but it does not affect our responsibility for what is done. We cannot touch it; there it stands irrevocable, with this solemn sentence written over the black pile, Every transgression and disobedience shall receive its just recompense of reward. We have nothing to pay.

But my text suggests, further, that a condition precedent to forgiveness is the recognition by us of our penniless insolvency. Though it is not distinctly stated, it is clearly and necessarily implied in the narrative, that the two debtors are to be supposed as having come and held out a couple of pairs of empty hands, and sued in formâ pauperis. You must recognise your insolvency if you expect to be forgiven. God does not accept dividends, so much in the pound, and let you off the rest on consideration thereof. If you are going to pay, you have to pay all; if He is going to forgive, you have to let Him forgive all. It must be one thing or the other, and you and I have to elect which of the two we shall stand by, and which of the two shall be applied to us.

Oh, dear friends! may we all come and say,

Nothing in my hand I bring,

Simply to Thy Cross I cling.

**III. And so, lastly, notice the love, which varies with the forgiveness.**

Tell Me which of them will love him most. Simon does not penetrate Christ's design, and there is a dash of supercilious contempt for the story and the question, as it seems to me, in the languid, half-courteous answer:--I suppose, if it were worth my while to think about such a thing, that he to whom he forgave the most. He did not know what a battery was going to be unmasked. Jesus says, Thou hast rightly judged.

The man that is most forgiven is the man that will love most. Well, that answer is true if all other things about the two debtors are equal. If they are the same sort of men, with the same openness to sentiments of gratitude and generosity, the man who is let off the smaller debt will generally be less obliged than the man who is let off the larger. But it is, alas! not always the case that we can measure benefits conferred by gratitude shown. Another element comes in--namely, the consciousness of the benefit received--which measures the gratitude far more accurately than the actual benefit bestowed. And so we must take both these things, the actual amount of forgiveness, so to speak, which is conferred, and the depth of the sense of the forgiveness received, in order to get the measure of the love which answers it. So that this principle breaks up into two thoughts, of which I have only just a word or two to say.

First, it is very often true that the greatest sinners make the greatest saints. There have been plenty of instances all down the history of the world, and there are plenty of instances, thank God, cropping up every day still in which some poor, wretched outcast, away out in the darkness, living on the husks that the swine do eat, and liking to be in the pigstye, is brought back into the Father's house, and turns out a far more loving son and a far better servant than the man that had never wandered away from it. The publicans and the harlotsdo often yet go into the Kingdom of God beforethe respectable people.

And there are plenty of people in Manchester that you would not touch with a pair of tongs who, if they could be got hold of, would make far more earnest and devoted Christians than you are. The very strength of passion and feeling which has swept them wrong, rightly directed, would make grand saints of them, just as the very same conditions of climate which, at tropics, bring tornadoes and cyclones and dreadful thunder-storms, do also bring abundant fertility. The river which devastates a nation, dammed up within banks, may fertilise half a continent. And if a man is brought out of the darkness, and looks back upon the years that are wasted, that may help him to a more intense consecration. And if he remembers the filth out of which Jesus Christ picked him, it will bind him to that Lord with a bond deep and sacred.

So let no outcast man or woman listening to me now despair. You can come back from the furthest darkness, and whatever ugly things you have in your memories and your consciences, you may make them stepping-stones on which to climb to the very throne of God. Let no respectable people despise the outcasts; there may be the making in them of far better Christians than we are.

But, on the other hand, let no man think lightly of sin. Though it can be forgiven and swept away, and the gross sinner may become the great saint, there will be scars and bitter memories and habits surging up again after we thought they were dead; and the old ague and fever that we caught in the pestilential land will hang by us when we have migrated into a more wholesome climate. It is never good for a man to have sinned, even though, through his sin, God may have taken occasion to bring him near to Himself.

But the second form of this principle is always true--namely, that those who are most conscious of forgiveness will be most fruitful of love. The depth and fervour of our individual Christianity depends more largely on the clearness of our consciousness of our own personal guilt and the firmness of our grasp of forgiveness than upon anything else.

Why is it that such multitudes of you professing Christians are such icebergs in your Christianity? Mainly for this reason--that you have never found out, in anything like an adequate measure, how great a sinner you are, and how sure and sweet and sufficient Christ's pardoning mercy is. And so you are like Simon--you will ask Jesus to dinner, but you will not give Him any water for His feet or ointment for His head. You will do the conventional and necessary pieces of politeness, but not one act of impulse from the heart ever comes from you. You discharge the duties of religion. What a phrase! You discharge the duties of religion. Ah! My brother, if you had been down into the horrible pit and the miry clay, and had seen a hand and a face looking down, and an arm outstretched to lift you; and if you had ever known what the rapture was after that subterraneous experience of having your feet set upon a rock and your goings established, you would come to Him and you would say, Take me all, O Lord! for I am all redeemed by Thee. To whom little is forgiven the same loveth little. Does not that explain the imperfect Christianity of thousands of us?

Fifty pence and five hundred pence are both small sums. Our Lord had nothing to do here with the absolute amount of debt, but only with the comparative amount of the two debts. But when He wanted to tell the people what the absolute amount of the debt was, he did it in that other story of the Unfaithful Servant. He owed his lord, not fifty pence (fifty eightpences or thereabouts), not five hundred pence, but ten thousand talents, which comes to near two and a half millions of English money. And that is the picture of our indebtedness to God. We have nothing to pay. Here is the payment--that Cross, that dying Christ. Turn your faith there, my brother, and then you will get ample forgiveness, and that will kindle love, and that will overflow in service. For the aperture in the heart at which forgiveness enters in is precisely of the same width as the one at which love goes out. Christ has loved us all, and perfectly. Let us love Him back again, who has died that we might live, and borne our sins in His own body.