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

**LUKE-027**. **LOVE AND FORGIVENESS by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"Her sins, which are many, are forgiven; for she loved much."*

*Luke 7:47*

This story contains three figures, three persons, who may stand for us as types or representatives of the divine love and of all its operation in the world, of the way in which it is received or rejected, and of the causes and consequences of its reception or rejection. There is the unloving, cleanly, respectable, self-complacent Pharisee, with all his contempt for this woman. There is the woman, with gross sin and mighty penitence, the great burst of love that is flowing out of her heart sweeping away before it, as it were, all the guilt of her transgressions. And, high over all, brooding over all, loving each, knowing each, pitying each, willing to save and be the Friend and Brother of each, is the embodied and manifested divine Love, the knowledge of whom is love in our hearts, and is life eternal. So that now I have simply to ask you to look with me, for a little while, at these three persons as representing for us the divine love that comes forth amongst sinners, and the twofold form in which that love is received. There is, first, Christ the love of God appearing amongst men, the foundation of all our love to Him. Then there is the woman, the penitent sinner, lovingly recognising the divine love. And then, last, there is the Pharisee, the self-righteous man, ignorant of himself, and empty of all love to God. These are the three figures to which I ask your attention now.

**I. We have Christ here standing as a manifestation of the divine love coming forth amongst sinners. His person and His words, the part He plays in this narrative, and the parable that He speaks in the course of it, have to be noticed under this head.**

First, then, you have this idea--that He, as bringing to us the love of God, shows it to us, as not at all dependent upon our merits or deserts: He frankly forgave them bothare the deep words in which He would point us to the source and the ground of all the love of God. Brethren, have you ever thought what a wonderful and blessed truth there lies in the old words of one of the Jewish prophets, I do not this for your sakes, O house of Israel, but for Mine holy Name's sake? The foundation of all God's love to us sinful men, that saying tells us, lies not in us, nor in anything about us, not in anything external to God Himself. He, and He alone, is the cause and reason, the motive and the end, of His own love to our world. And unless we have grasped that magnificent thought as the foundation of all our acceptance in Him, I think we have not yet learnt half of the fullness which, even in this world, may belong to our conceptions of the love of God--a love that has no motive but Himself; a love that is not evoked even (if I may so say) by regard to His creatureswants; a love, therefore, which is eternal, being in that divine heart before there were creatures upon whom it could rest; a love that is its own guarantee, its own cause--safe and firm, therefore, with all the firmness and serenity of the divine nature-incapable of being affected by our transgression, deeper than all our sins, more ancient than our very existence, the very essence and being of God Himself. He frankly forgave them both. If you seek the source of divine love, you must go high up into the mountains of God, and learn that it, as all other of His (shall I say) emotions, and feelings, and resolutions, and purposes, owns no reason but Himself, no motive but Himself; lies wrapped in the secret of His nature, who is all-sufficient for His own blessedness, and all whose work and being is caused by, and satisfied, and terminates in His own fullness. God is love: therefore beneath all considerations of what we may want--deeper and more blessed than all thoughts of a compassion that springs from the feeling of human distress and the sight of man's misery--lies this thought of an affection which does not need the presence of sorrow to evoke it, which does not want the touch of our finger to flow out, but by its very nature is everlasting, by its very nature is infinite, by its very nature must be pouring out the flood of its own joyous fullness for ever and ever!

Then, again, Christ standing here for us as the representative and revelation of this divine love which He manifests to us, tells us, too, that whilst it is not caused by us, but comes from the nature of God, it is not turned away by our sins. This man, if he were a prophet, would have known who and what manner of woman this is that toucheth Him, says the unloving and self-righteous heart, for she is a sinner. Ah! there is nothing more beautiful than the difference between the thought about sinful creatures which is natural to a holy being, and the thought about sinful creatures which is natural to a self-righteous being. The one is all contempt; the other, all pity. He knew what she was, and therefore He let her come close to Him with the touch of her polluted hand, and pour out the gains of her lawless life and the adornments of her former corruption upon His most blessed and most holy head. His knowledge of her as a sinner, what did it do to His love for her? It made that love gentle and tender, as knowing that she could not bear the revelation of the blaze of His purity. It smoothed His face and softened His tones, and breathed through all His knowledge and notice of her timid and yet confident approach. Daughter, I know all about it--all thy wanderings and thy vile transgressions: I know them all, and My love is mightier than all these. They may be as the great sea, but my love is like the everlasting mountains, whose roots go down beneath the ocean, and My love is like the everlasting heaven, whose brightness covers it all over. God's love is Christ's love; Christ's love is God's love. And this is the lesson that we gather--that that infinite and divine loving-kindness does not turn away from thee, my brother and my friend, because thou art a sinner, but remains hovering about thee, with wooing invitations and with gentle touches, if it may draw thee to repentance, and open a fountain of answering affection in thy seared and dry heart. The love of God is deeper than all our sins. For His great love wherewith He loved us, when we were dead in sins, He quickened us.

Sin is but the cloud behind which the everlasting sun lies in all its power and warmth, unaffected by the cloud; and the light will yet strike, the light of His love will yet pierce through, with its merciful shafts bringing healing in their beams, and dispersing all the pitchy darkness of man's transgression. And as the mists gather themselves up and roll away, dissipated by the heat of that sun in the upper sky, and reveal the fair earth below--so the love of Christ shines in, molting the mist and dissipating the fog, thinning it off in its thickest places, and at last piercing its way right through it, down to the heart of the man that has been lying beneath the oppression of this thick darkness, and who thought that the fog was the sky, and that there was no sun there above. God be thanked! the everlasting love of God that comes from the depth of His own being, and is there because of Himself, will never be quenched because of man's sin.

And so, in the next place, Christ teaches us here that this divine love, when it comes forth among sinners, necessarily manifests itself first in the form of forgiveness. There was nothing to be done with the debtors until the debt was wiped out; there was no possibility of other gifts of the highest sort being granted to them, until the great score was cancelled and done away with. When the love of God comes down into a sinful world, it must come first and foremost as pardoning mercy. There are no other terms upon which there can be a union betwixt the loving-kindness of God, and the emptiness and sinfulness of my heart, except only this--that first of all there shall be the clearing away from my soul of the sins which I have gathered there, and then there will be space for all other divine gifts to work and to manifest themselves. Only do not fancy that when we speak about forgiveness, we simply mean that a man's position in regard to the penalties of sin is altered. That is not all the depth of the scriptural notion of forgiveness. It includes far more than the removal of outward penalties. The heart of it all is, that the love of God rests upon the sinner, unturned away even by his sins, passing over his sins, and removing his sins for the sake of Christ. My friend, if you are talking in general terms about a great divine loving-kindness that wraps you round--if you have a great deal to say, apart from the Gospel, about the love of God as being your hope and confidence--I want you to reflect on this, that the first word which the love of God speaks to sinful men is pardon; and unless that is your notion of God's love, unless you look to that as the first thing of all, let me tell you, you may have before you a very fair picture of a very beautiful, tender, good-natured benevolence, but you have not nearly reached the height of the vigour and yet the tenderness of the Scripture notion of the love of God. It is not a love which says, Well, put sin on one side, and give the man the blessings all the same, not a love which has nothing to say about that great fact of transgression, not a love which gives it the go-by, and leaves it standing: but a love which passes into the heart through the portal of pardon, a love which grapples with the fact of sin first, and has nothing to say to a man until it has said that message to him.

And but one word more on this part of my subject--here we see the love of God thus coming from Himself; not turned away by man's sins; being the cause of forgiveness; expressing itself in pardon; and last of all, demanding service. Simon, thou gavest Me no water, thou gavest Me no kiss, My head thou didst not anoint: I expected all these things from thee--I desired them all from thee: My love came that they might spring in thy heart; thou hast not given them; My love is wounded, as it were disappointed, and it turns away from thee!Yes, after all that we have said about the freeness and fullness, the unmerited, and uncaused, and unmotived nature of that divine affection--after all that we have said about its being the source of every blessing to man, asking nothing from him, but giving everything to him; it still remains true, that God's love, when it comes to men, comes that it may evoke an answering echo in the human heart, and though it might be much bold to enjoin, yet for love's sake rather beseechesus to give unto Him who has given all unto us. There, then, stands forth in the narrative, Christ as a revelation of the divine love amongst sinners.

**II. Now, in the second place, let us look for a moment at this woman as the representative of a class of character--the penitent lovingly recognising the divine love.**

The words which I have read as my text contain a statement as to the woman's character: Her sins, which are many, are forgiven; for she loved much. Allow me just one word of explanation, in the shape of exposition, on these words. Great blunders have been built upon them. I dare say you have seen epitaphs--(I have)--written often on gravestones with this misplaced idea on them--Very sinful; but there was a great deal of love in the person; and for the sake of the love, God passed by the sin!Now, when Christ says She loved much, He does not mean to say that her love was the cause of her forgiveness--not at all. He means to say that her love was the proof of her forgiveness, and that it was so because her love was a consequence of her forgiveness. As, for instance, we might say, The woman is in great distress, for she weeps; but we do not mean thereby that the weeping is the reason of the distress, but the means of our knowing the sorrow. It is the proof because it is the consequence. Or (to put it into the simplest shape) the love does not go before the forgiveness, but the forgiveness goes before the love; and because the love comes after the forgiveness, it is the sign of the forgiveness. That this is the true interpretation, you will see if you look back for a moment at the narrative which precedes, where He says, He frankly forgave them both: tell me, therefore, which of them will love him most?Pardon is the pre-requisite of love, and love is a consequence of the sense of forgiveness.

This, then, is the first thing to observe: all true love to God is preceded in the heart by these two things--a sense of sin, and an assurance of pardon. Brethren, there is no love possible--real, deep, genuine, worthy of being called love of God--which does not start with the belief of my own transgression, and with the thankful reception of forgiveness in Christ. You do nothing to get pardon for yourselves; but unless you have the pardon you have no love to God. I know that sounds a very hard thing--I know that many will say it is very narrow and very bigoted, and will ask, Do you mean to tell me that the man whose bosom glows with gratitude because of earthly blessings, has no love--that all that natural religion which is in people, apart from this sense of forgiveness in Christ, do you mean to tell me that this is not all genuine?Yes, most assuredly; and I believe the Bible and man's conscience say the same thing. I do not for one moment deny that there may be in the hearts of those who are in the grossest ignorance of themselves as transgressors, certain emotions of instinctive gratitude and natural religiousness, directed to some higher power dimly thought of as the author of their blessings and the source of much gladness: but has that kind of thing got any living power in it? I demur to its right to be called love to God at all, for this reason--because it seems to me that the object that is loved is not God, but a fragment of God. He who but says, I owe to Him breath and all things; in Him I live and move, and have my being, has left out one-half at least of the Scriptural conception of God. Your God, my friend, is not the God of the Bible, unless He stands before you clothed in infinite loving-kindness indeed; but clothed also in strict and rigid justice. Is your God perfect and entire? If you say that you love Him, and if you do so, is it as the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ? Have you meditated on the depths of the requirements of His law? Have you stood silent and stricken at the thought of the blaze of His righteousness? Have you passed through all the thick darkness and the clouds with which He surrounds His throne, and forced your way at last into the inner light where He dwells? Or is it a vague divinity that you worship and love? Which? Ah, if a man study his Bible, and try to find out for himself, from its veracious records, who and what manner of God the living God is, there will be no love in his heart to that Being except only when he has flung himself at His feet, and said, Father of eternal purity, and God of all holiness and righteousness, forgive Thy child, a sinful broken man--forgive Thy child, for the sake of Thy Son!That, and that alone, is the road by which we come to possess the love of God, as a practical power, filling and sanctifying our souls; and such is the God to whom alone our love ought to be rendered; and I tell you (or rather the Bible tells you, and the Gospel and the Cross of Christ tell you), there is no love without pardon, no fellowship and sonship without the sense of sin and the acknowledgment of foul transgression!

So much, then, for what precedes the love of Christ in the heart; now a word as to what follows. Her sins, which are many, are forgiven; for she loved much. The sense of sin precedes forgiveness: forgiveness precedes love; love precedes all acceptable and faithful service. If you want to do, love. If you want to know, love. This poor woman knew Christ a vast deal better than that Pharisee there. He said, This man is not a prophet; He does not understand the woman. Ay, but the woman knew herself better than the Pharisee knew himself, knew herself better than the Pharisee knew her, knew Christ, above all, a vast deal better than he did. Love is the gate of all knowledge.

This poor woman brings her box of ointment, a relic perhaps of past evil life, and once meant for her own adornment, and pours it on His head, lavishes offices of service which to the unloving heart seem bold in the giver and cumbersome to the receiver. It is little she can do, but she does it. Her full heart demands expression, and is relieved by utterance in deeds. The deeds are spontaneous, welling out at the bidding of an inward impulse, not drawn out by the force of an external command. It matters not what practical purpose they serve. The motive of them makes their glory. Love prompts them, love justifies them, and His love interprets them, and His love accepts them. The love which flows from the sense of forgiveness is the source of all obedience as well as the means of all knowledge.

Brethren, we differ from each other in all respects but one, We have all sinned and come short of the glory of God; we all need the love of Christ; it is offered to us all; but, believe me, the sole handle by which you can lay hold of it, is the feeling of your own sinfulness and need of pardon. I preach to you a love that you do not need to buy, a mercy that you do not need to bribe, a grace that is all independent of your character, and condition, and merits, which issues from God for ever, and is lying at your doors if you will take it. You are a sinful man; Christ died for you. He comes to give you His forgiving mercy. Take it, be at rest. So shalt thou love and know and do, and so shall He love and guide thee!

**III. Now one word, and then I have done. A third character stands here--the unloving and self-righteous man, all ignorant of the love of Christ.**

He is the antithesis of the woman and her character. You remember the traditional peculiarities and characteristics of the class to which he belonged. He is a fair specimen of the whole of them. Respectable in life, rigid in morality, unquestionable in orthodoxy; no sound of suspicion having ever come near his belief in all the traditions of the elders; intelligent and learned, high up among the ranks of Israel! What was it that made this man's morality a piece of dead nothingness? What was it that made his orthodoxy just so many dry words, from out of which all the life had gone? What was it? This one thing: there was no love in it. As I said, Love is the foundation of all obedience; without it, morality degenerates into mere casuistry. Love is the foundation of all knowledge; without it, religion degenerates into a chattering about Moses, and doctrines, and theories; a thing that will neither kill nor make alive, that never gave life to a single soul or blessing to a single heart, and never put strength into any hand for the conflict and strife of daily life. There is no more contemptible and impotent thing on the face of the earth than morality divorced from love, and religious thoughts divorced from a heart full of the love of God. Quick corruption or long decay, and in either case death and putrefaction, are the end of these. You and I need that lesson, my friends. It is of no use for us to condemn Pharisees that have been dead and in their graves for nineteen hundred years. The same thing besets us all; we all of us try to get away from the centre, and dwell contented on the surface. We are satisfied to take the flowers and stick them into our little gardens, without any roots to them, when of course they all die out! People may try to cultivate virtue without religion, and to acquire correct notions of moral and spiritual truth; and partially and temporarily they may succeed, but the one will be a yoke of bondage, and the other a barren theory. I repeat, love is the basis of all knowledge and of all right-doing. If you have got that firm foundation laid in the soul, then the knowledge and the practice will be builded in God's own good time; and if not, the higher you build the temple, and the more aspiring are its cloud-pointing pinnacles, the more certain will be its toppling some day, and the more awful will be the ruin when it comes. The Pharisee was contented with himself, and so there was no sense of sin in him, therefore there was no penitent recognition of Christ as forgiving and loving him, therefore there was no love to Christ. Because there was no love, there was neither light nor heat in his soul, his knowledge was barren notions, and his painful doings were soul-destructive self-righteousness.

And so it all comes round to the one blessed message: My friend, God hath loved us with an everlasting love. He has provided an eternal redemption and pardon for us. If you would know Christ at all, you must go to Him as a sinful man, or you are shut out from Him altogether. If you will go to Him as a sinful being, fling yourself down there, not try to make yourself better, but say, I am full of unrighteousness and transgression; let Thy love fall upon me and heal me; you will get the answer, and in your heart there shall begin to live and grow up a root of love to Him, which shall at last effloresce into all knowledge and unto all purity of obedience; for he that hath had much forgiveness, loveth much; and he that loveth knoweth God, and dwelleth in God, and God in Him!