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

**LUKE-051**. **TRUE SABBATH OBSERVANCE by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"10. And He was teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath. 11. And, behold, there was a woman which had a spirit of infirmity eighteen years, and was bowed together, and could in no wise lift up herself. 12. And when Jesus saw her, He called her to Him, and said unto her, Woman, thou art loosed from thine infirmity. 13. And He laid His hands on her: and immediately she was made straight, and glorified God. 14. And the ruler of the synagogue answered with indignation, because that Jesus had healed on the Sabbath day, and said unto the people, There are six days in which men ought to work: in them therefore come and be healed, and not on the Sabbath day. 15. The Lord then answered him, and said, Thou hypocrite, doth not each one of you on the Sabbath loose his ox or his ass from the stall and lead him away to watering! 16. And ought not this woman, being a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan hath bound, lo, these eighteen years, be loosed from this bond on the Sabbath day? 17. And when He had said these things, all His adversaries were ashamed: and all the people rejoiced for all the glorious things that were done by Him."*

*Luke 13:10-17*

This miracle was wrought, unasked, on a woman, in a synagogue, and by all these characteristics was specially interesting to Luke. He alone records it. The narrative falls into two parts--the miracle, and the covert attack of the ruler of the synagogue, with our Lord's defence.

What better place than the synagogue could there be for a miracle of mercy? The service of man is best built on the service of God, and the service of God is as truly accomplished in deeds of human kindness done for His sake as in oral worship. The religious basis of beneficence and the beneficent manifestation of religion are commonplaces of Christian practice and thought from the beginning, and are both set forth in our Lord's life. He did not substitute doing good to men for worshipping God, as a once much-belauded but now all-but-forgotten anti-Christian writer has done; but He showed us both in their true relations. We have Christ's authority for regarding the woman's infirmity as the result of demoniacal possession, but the case presents some singular features. There seems to have been no other consequence than her incapacity to stand straight. Apparently the evil power had not touched her moral nature, for she had somehow managed to drag herself to the synagogue to pray; she glorified Godfor her cure, and Christ called her a daughter of Abraham, which surely means more than simply that she was a Jewess. It would seem to have been a case of physical infirmity only, and perhaps rather of evil inflicted eighteen years before than of continuous demoniacal possession.

But be that as it may, there is surely no getting over our Lord's express testimony here, that purely physical ills, not distinguishable from natural infirmity, were then, in some instances, the work of a malignant, personal power. Jesus knew the duration of the woman's bondand the cause of it, by the same supernatural knowledge. That sad, bowed figure, with eyes fixed on the ground, and unable to look into His face, which yet had crawled to the synagogue, may teach us lessons of patience and of devout submission. She might have found good excuses for staying at home, but she, no doubt, found solace in worship; and she would not have so swiftly glorified Godfor her cure, if she had not often sought Him in her infirmity. They who wait on Him often find more than they expect in His house.

Note the flow of Christ's unasked sympathy and help. We have already seen several instances of the same thing in this Gospel. The sight of misery ever set the chords of that gentle, unselfish heart vibrating, as surely as the wind draws music from the Aeolian harp strings. So it should be with us, and so would it be, if we had in us the law of the Spirit of life in Christmaking us free from the law ofself. But His spontaneous sympathy is not merely the perfection of manhood; it is the revelation of God. Unasked, the divine love pours itself on men, and gives all that it can give to those who do not seek, that they may be drawn to seek the better gifts which cannot be given unasked. God tarrieth not for man, nor waiteth for the sons of men, in giving His greatest gift. No prayers besought Heaven for a Saviour. God's love is its own motive, and wells up by its inherent diffusiveness. Before we call, He answers.

Note the manner of the cure. It is twofold--a word and a touch. The former is remarkable, as not being, like most of the cures of demoniacs, a command to the evil spirit to go forth, but an assurance to the sufferer, fitted to inspire her with hope, and to encourage her to throw off the alien tyranny. The touch was the symbol to her of communicated power--not that Jesus needed a vehicle for His delivering strength, but that the poor victim, crushed in spirit, needed the outward sign to help her in realising the new energy that ran in her veins, and strengthened her muscles. Unquestionably the cure was miraculous, and its cause was Christ's will.

But apparently the manner of cure gave more place to the faith of the sufferer, and to the effort which her faith in Christ's word and touch heartened her to put forth, than we find in other miracles. She could in no wise lift herself up, not because of any malformation or deficiency in physical power, but because that malign influence laid a heavy hand on her will and body, and crushed her down. Only supernatural power could deliver from supernatural evil, but that power wrought through as well us OB her; and when she believed that she was loosed from her infirmity, and had received strength from Jesus, she was loosed.

This makes the miracle no less, but it makes it a mirror in which the manner of our deliverance from a worse dominion of Satan is shadowed. Christ is come to loose us all from the yoke of bondage, which bows our faces to the ground, and makes us unfit to look up. He only can loose us, and His way of doing it is to assure us that we are free, and to give us power to fling off the oppression in the strength of faith in Him.

Note the immediate cure and its immediate result. The back bowed down alwaysfor eighteen weary years is not too stiff to be made straight at once. The Christ-given power obliterates all traces of the past evil. Where He is the physician, there is no period of gradual convalescence, but the thing is done suddenly; and, though in the spiritual realm, there still hang about pardoned men remains of forgiven sin, they are sanctifiedin their inward selves, and have but to see to it that they work out in character and conduct that righteousness and holiness of truthwhich they have received in the new nature given them through faith.

How rapturous was the gratitude from the woman's lips, which broke in upon the formal, proper, and heartless worship of the synagogue! The immediate hallowing of her joy into praise surely augurs a previously devout heart. Thanksgiving generally comes thus swiftly after mercies, when prayer has habitually preceded them. The sweetest sweetness of all our blessings is only enjoyed when we glorify God for them. Incense must be kindled, to be fragrant, and our joys must be fired by devotion, to give their rarest perfume.

The cavils of the ruler and Christ's defence are the second part of this incident. Note the blindness and cold-heartedness born of religious formalism. This synagogue official has no eye for the beauty of Christ's pity, no heart to rejoice in the woman's deliverance, no ear for the music of her praise. All that he sees is a violation of ecclesiastical order. That is the sin of sins in his eyes. He admits the reality of Christ's healing power, but that does not lead him to recognition of His mission. What a strange state of mind it was that acknowledged the miracle, and then took offence at its being done on the Sabbath!

Note, too, his disingenuous cowardice in attacking the people when he meant Christ. He blunders, too, in his scolding; for nobody had come to be healed. They had come to worship; and even if they had come for healing, the coming was no breach of Sabbath regulations, whatever the healing might be. There are plenty of people like this stickler for propriety and form, and if you want to find men blind as bats to the manifest tokens of a divine hand, and hard as millstones towards misery, and utterly incapable of glowing with enthusiasm or of recognising it, you will find them among ecclesiastical martinets, who are all for having things done decently and in order, and would rather that a hundred poor sufferers should continue bowed down than that one of their regulations should be broken in lifting them up. The more men are filled with the spirit of worship, the less importance will they attach to the pedantic adherence to its forms, which is the most part of some people's religion.

Mark the severity, which is loving severity, of Christ's answer. He speaks to all who shared the ruler's thoughts, of whom there were several present (v. 17, adversaries). Piercing words which disclose hidden and probably unconscious sins, are quite in place on the lips into which grace was poured. Well for those who let Him tell them their faults now, and do not wait for the light of judgment to show themselves to themselves for the first time.

Wherein lay these men's hypocrisy? They were pretending zeal for the Sabbath, while they were really moved by anger at the miracle, which would have been equally unwelcome on any day of the week. They were pretending that their zeal for the Sabbath was the result of their zeal for God, while it was only zeal for their Rabbinical niceties, and had no religious element in it at all. They wished to make the Sabbath law tight enough to restrain Jesus from miracles, while they made it loose enough to allow them to look after their own interests.

Men may be unconscious hypocrites, and these are the most hopeless. We are all in danger of fancying that we are displaying our zeal for the Lord, when we are only contending for our own additions to, or interpretations of, His will. There is no religion necessarily implied in enforcing forms of belief or conduct.

Our Lord's defence is, first of all, a conclusive argumentum ad hominem, which shuts the mouths of the objectors; but it is much more. The Talmud has minute rules for leading out animals on the Sabbath: An ass may go out with his pack saddle if it was tied on before the Sabbath, but not with a bell or a yoke; a camel may go out with a halter, but not with a rag tied to his tail; a string of camels may be led if the driver takes all the halters in his hand, and does not twist them, but they must not be tied to one another--and so on for pages. If, then, these sticklers for rigid observance of the Sabbath admitted that a beast's thirst was reason enough for work to relieve it, it did not lie in their mouths to find fault with the relief of a far greater human need.

But the words hold a wider truth, applicable to our conduct. The relief of human sorrow is always in season. It is a sacred duty which hallows any hour. Is not this the fast [and the feast too] that I have chosen ... to let the oppressed go free, and that ye break every yoke?The spirit of the words is to put the exercise of beneficence high above the formalities of worship.

Note, too, the implied assertion of the dignity of humanity, the pitying tone of the lo, these eighteen years, the sympathy of the Lord with the poor woman, and the implication of the terrible tragedy of Satan's bondage. If we have His Spirit in us, and look at the solemn facts of life as He did, all these pathetic considerations will be present to our minds as we behold the misery of men, and, moved by the thoughts of their lofty place in God's scheme of things, of their long and dreary bondage, of the evil power that holds them fast, and of what they may become, even sons and daughters of the Highest, we shall be fired with the same longing to help which filled Christ's heart, and shall count that hour consecrated, and not profaned, in which we are able to bring liberty to the captives, and an upward gaze of hope to them that have been bowed down.