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

**LUKE-055**. **EXCUSES NOT REASONS by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"They all with one consent began to make excuse."*

*Luke 14:18*

Jesus Christ was at a feast in a Pharisee's house. It was a strange place for Him--and His words at the table were also strange. For He first rebuked the guests, and then the host; telling the former to take the lower rooms, and bidding the latter widen his hospitality to those that could not recompense him. It was a sharp saying; and one of the other guests turned the edge of it by laying hold of our Lord's final words: Thou shalt be recompensed at the resurrection of the just, and saying, no doubt in a pious tone and with a devout shake of the head, Blessed is he that shall eat bread in the Kingdom of God. It was a very proper thing to say, but there was a ring of conventional, commonplace piety about it, which struck unpleasantly on Christ's ear. He answers the speaker with that strange story of the great feast that nobody would come to, as if He had said, You pretend to think that it is a blessed thing to eat bread in the Kingdom of God, Why! You will not eat bread when it is offered to you.

I dare say you all know enough of the parable to make it unnecessary for me to go over it. A great feast is prepared; invitations, more or less general, are sent out at first, everything is ready; and, behold, there is a table, and nobody to sit at it. A strange experience for a hospitable man! And so he sends his servants to beat up the unwilling guests, and, one after another, with more or less politeness, refuses to come.

I need not follow the story further. In the latter part of the parable our Lord shadows the transference of the blessings of the Kingdom to the Gentiles, outcasts as the Jews thought them, skulking in the hedges and tramping on the highways. In the first part He foreshadows the failure of His own preaching amongst His own people. But Jews and Englishmen are very much alike. The way in which these invited guests treated the invitation to this feast is being repeated, day by day, by thousands of men round us; and by some of ourselves. They all, with one consent, began to make excuse.

**I. The first thing that I would desire you to notice is the strangely unanimous refusal.**

The guestsconduct in the story is such as life and reality would afford no example of. No set of people, asked to a great banquet, would behave as these people in the parable do. Then, is the introduction of such an unnatural trait as this a fault in the construction of narrative? No! Rather it is a beauty, for the very point of the story is the utter unnaturalness of the conduct described, and the contrast that is presented between the way in which men regard the lower blessings from which these people are represented as turning, and in which they regard the loftier blessings that are offered. Nobody would turn his hack upon such a banquet if he had the chance of going to it. What, then, shall we say of those who, by platoons and regiments, turn their backs upon this higher offer? The very preposterous unnaturalness of the conduct, if the parable were a true story, points to the deep meaning that lies behind it: that in that higher region the unnatural is the universal, or all but universal.

And, indeed, it is so. One would almost venture to say that there is a kind of law according to which the more valuable a thing is the less men care to have it; or, if you like to put it into more scientific language, the attraction of an object is in the inverse ratio to its worth. Small things, transitory things, material things, everybody grasps at; and the number of graspers steadily decreases as you go up the scale in preciousness, until, when you reach the highest of all, there are the fewest that want them. Is there anything lower than good that merely gratifies the body? Is there anything that the most of men want more? Are there many things lower in the scale than money? Are there many things that pull more strongly? Is not truth better than wealth? Are there more pursuers of it than there are of the former? For one man who is eager to know, and counts his life well spent, in following knowledge

Like a sinking star,

Beyond the furthest bounds of human thought,

there are a hundred who think it rightly expended in the pursuit after the wealth that perishes. Is not goodness higher than truth, and are not the men that are content to devote themselves to becoming wise more numerous than those that are content to devote themselves to becoming pure? And, topmost of all, is there anything to be compared with the gifts that are held out to us in that great Saviour and in His message? And is there anything that the mass of men pass by with more unanimous refusal than the offered feast which the great King of humanity has provided for His subjects? What is offered for each of us, pressed upon us, in the gift of Jesus Christ? Help, guidance, companionship, restfulness of heart, power of obedience, victory over self, control of passions, supremacy over circumstances, tranquillity deep and genuine, death abolished, Heaven opened, measureless hopes following upon perfect fruition, here and hereafter. These things are all gathered into, and their various sparkles absorbed in, the one steady light of that one great encyclopaediacal word--Salvation. These gifts are going begging, lying at our doors, offered to every one of us, pressed upon all on the simple condition of taking Christ for Saviour and King. And what do we do with them? They all, with one consent, began to make excuse.

One hears of barbarous people that have no use for the gold that abounds in their country, and do not think it half as valuable as glass beads. That is how men estimate the true and the trumpery treasures which Christ and the world offer. I declare it seems to me that, calmly looking at men's nature, and their duration, and then thinking of the aims of the most of them, we should not be very far wrong if we said an epidemic of insanity sits upon the world. For surely to turn away from the gold and to hug the glass beads is very little short of madness. This their way is their folly, and their posterity approve their sayings.

And now notice that this refusal may be, and often in fact is, accompanied with lip recognition of the preciousness of the neglected things. That Pharisee who put up the pillow of his pious sentiment--a piece of cant, because he did not feel what he was saying--to deaden the cannon-ball of Christ's word, is only a pattern of a good many of us who think that to say, Blessed is he that eateth bread in the Kingdom of God, with the proper unctuous roll of the voice, is pretty nearly as good as to take the bread that is offered to us. There are no more difficult people to get at than the people, of whom I am sure I have some specimens before me now, who bow their heads in assent to the word of the Gospel, and by bowing them escape its impact, and let it whistle harmlessly over. You that believe every word that I or my brethren preach, and never dream of letting it affect your conduct--if there be degrees in that lunatic asylum of the world, surely you are candidates for the highest place.

**II. Now, secondly, notice the flimsy excuses.**

They all, with one consent, began. I do not suppose that they had laid their heads together, or that our Lord intends us to suppose that there was a conspiracy and concert of refusal, but only that without any previous consultation, all had the same sentiments, and offered substantially the same answer. All the reasons that are given come to one and the same thing--viz. occupation with present interests, duties, possessions, or affections. There are differences in the excuses which are not only helps to the vividness of the narrative, but also express differences in the speakers. One man is a shade politer than the others. He puts his refusal on the ground of necessity. He must, and so he courteously prays that he may be held excused. The second one is not quite so polite; but still there is a touch of courtesy about him too. He does not pretend necessity as his friend had done, but he simply says, I am going; and that is not quite so courteous as the former answer, but still he begs to be excused. The last man thinks that he has such an undeniable reason that he may be as brusque as he likes, and so he says, I have married a wife, and therefore I cannot comeand I do not make any apologies. So with varying degrees of apparent recognition of the claims of host and feast, the ground of refusal is set forth as possessions in two cases, and as affections in the third; and these so fill the men's hearts and minds that they have no time to attend to the call that summons them to the feast.

Now it is obvious to note that the alleged necessity in one of these excuses was no necessity at all. Who made the must? The man himself. The field would not run away though he waited till to-morrow. The bargain was finished, for he had bought it. There was no necessity for his going, and the next day would have done quite as well as to-day; so the mustwas entirely in his own mind. That is to say, a great many of us mask inclinations under the garb of imperative duties and say, We are so pressed by necessary obligations and engagements that we really have not got any time to attend to these higher questions which you are trying to press upon us. You remember the old story. I must live, said the thief. I do not see the necessity, said the judge. A man says, I must be at business to-morrow morning at half-past eight. How can I think about religion?Well, if you really must, you can think about it. But if you are only juggling and deceiving yourself with inclinations that pose as necessities, the sooner the veil is off the better, and you understand whereabouts you are, and what is your true position in reference to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

But then let me, only in a word, remind you that the other side of the excuse is a very operative one. I have married a wife, and therefore I cannot come. There are some of us around whom the strong grasp of earthly affections is flung so embracingly and sweetly that we cannot, as we think, turn our loves upward and fix them upon God. Fathers and mothers, husbands and wives, parents and children, remember Christ's deep words, A man's foes shall be they of his own household; and be sure that the prediction is fulfilled many a time by the hindrances of their love even more than by the opposition of their hatred.

All these excuses refer to legitimate things. It is perfectly right that the man should go and see after his field, perfectly right that the ten bullocks should be harnessed and tried, perfectly right that the sweetness of wedded love should be tasted and drunk, perfectly wrong that any of them should be put as a reason for not accepting Christ's offer. Let us take the lesson that legitimate business and lawful and pure affections may ruin a soul, and may constitute the hindrance that blocks its road to God.

Brethren, I said that these were flimsy excuses. I shall have to explain what I mean by that in a moment. As excuses they are flimsy; but as reasons which actually operate with hundreds of people, preventing them from being Christians, they are not flimsy; they are most solid and real. Our Lord does not mean them as exhaustive. There are a great many other grounds upon which different types of character turn away from the offered blessings of the Gospel, which do not come within view of the parable. But although not exhaustive they are widely operative. I wonder how many men and women there are listening to me now of whom it is true that they are so busy with their daily occupations that they have not time to be religious, and of how many men, and perhaps more especially women, among us at this moment it is true that their hearts are so ensnared with loves that belong to earth--beautiful and potentially sacred and elevating as these are--that they have not time to turn themselves to the one eternal Lover of their souls. Let me beseech you, dear friends--and you especially who are strangers to this place and to my voice--to do what I cannot, and would not if I could, lay these thoughts on your own hearts, and ask yourselves, Is it I?

And then before I pass from this point of my discourse, remember that the contrariety between these duties and the acceptance of the offered feast existed only in the imagination of the men that made them. There is no reason why you should not go to the feast and see after your field. There is no reason why you should not love your wife and go to the feast. God's summons comes into collision with many wishes, but with no duties or legitimate occupations. The more a man accepts and lives upon the good that Jesus Christ spreads before him, the more fit will he be for all his work, and for all his enjoyments. The field will be better tilled, the bullocks will be better driven, the wife will be more wisely, tenderly, and sacredly loved if in your hearts Christ is enthroned, and whatsoever you do you do as for Him. It is only the excessive and abusive possession of His gifts and absorption in our duties and relations that turns them into impediments in the path of our Christian life. And the flimsiness of the excuse is manifest by the fact that the contrariety is self-created.

**III. Lastly, note the real reason.**

I have said that as pretexts the three explanations were unsatisfactory. When a man pleads a previous engagement as a reason for not accepting an invitation, nine times out of ten it is a polite way of saying, I do not want to go. It was so in this case. How all these absolute impossibilities, which made it perfectly out of the question that the three recreants should sit down at the table, would have melted into thin air if, by any chance, there had come into their minds a wish to be there! They would have found means to look after the field and the cattle and the home, and to be in their places notwithstanding, if they had wanted. The real reason that underlies men's turning away from Christ's offer is, as I said in the beginning of my remarks, that they do not care to have it. They have no inclinations and no tastes for the higher and purer blessings.

Brother, do not let us lose ourselves in generalities. I am talking about you, and about the set of your inclinations and tastes. And I want you to ask yourself whether it is not a fact that some of you like oxen better than God; whether it is not a fact that if the two were there before you, you would rather have a good big field made over to you than have the food that is spread upon that table.

Well then what is the cause of the perverted inclination? Why is it that when Christ says, Child, come to Me, and I will give thee pardon, peace, purity, power, hope, Heaven, Myself, there is no responsive desire kindled in the heart? Why do I not want God? Why do I not care for Jesus Christ? Why do the blessings about which preachers are perpetually talking seem to me so shadowy, so remote from anything that I need, so ill-fitting to anything that I desire? There must be something very deeply wrong. This is what is wrong, your heart has shaken itself loose from dependence upon God; and you have no love as you ought to have for Him. You prefer to stand alone. The prodigal son, having gone away into the far country, likes the swine's husks better than the bread in his father's house, and it is only when the supply of the latter coarse dainty gives out that the purer taste becomes strong. Strange, is it not? but yet it is true.

Now there are one or two things that I want to say about this indifference, resulting from preoccupation and from alienation, and which hides its ugliness behind all manner of flimsy excuses. One is that the reason itself is utterly unreasonable. I have said the true reason is indifference. Can anybody put into words which do not betray the absurdity of the position, the conduct of the man who says, I do not want God; give me five yoke of oxen. That is the real good, and I will stick by that. There is one mystery in the world, and if it were solved everything would be solved; and that mystery is that men turn away from God and cleave to earth. No account can be given of sin. No account can be given of man's preference for the lesser and the lower; and neglect of the greater and the higher, except to say it is utterly inexplicable and unreasonable.

I need not say such indifference is shameful ingratitude to the yearning love which provides, and the infinite sacrifice by which was provided, this great feast to which we are asked. It cost Christ pains, and tears, and blood, to prepare that feast, and He looks to us, and says to us, Come and drink of the wine which I have mingled, and eat of the bread which I have provided at such a cost. There are monsters of ingratitude, but there are none more miraculously monstrous than the men who look, as some of us are doing, untouched on Christ's sacrifice, and listen unmoved to Christ's pleadings.

The excuses will disappear one day. We can trick our consciences; we can put off the messengers; we cannot deceive the Host. All the thin curtains that we weave to veil the naked ugliness of our unwillingness to accept Christ will be burnt up one day. And I pray you to ask yourselves, What shall I say when He comes and asks me, "Why was thy place empty at My table"?And he was speechless. Do not, dear brethren, refuse that gift, lest you bring upon yourselves the terrible and righteous wrath of the Host whose invitation you are slighting, and at whose table you are refusing to sit.