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

**LUKE-059**. **GIFTS TO THE PRODIGAL by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"... Bring forth the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet: 23. And bring hither the fatted calf, and kill it..."*

*Luke 15:22, 23*

God's giving always follows His forgiving. It is not so with us. We think ourselves very magnanimous when we pardon; and we seldom go on to lavish favours where we have overlooked faults. Perhaps it is right that men who have offended against men should earn restoration by acts, and should have to ride quarantine, as it were, for a time. But I question whether forgiveness is ever true which is not, like God's, attended by large-hearted gifts. If pardon is only the non-infliction of penalty, then it is natural enough that it should be considered sufficient by itself, and that the evildoer should not be rewarded for having been bad. But if pardon is the outflow of the love of the offended to the offender, then it can scarcely be content with simply giving the debtor his discharge, and turning him into the world penniless.

However that may be with regard to men, God's forgiveness is essentially the communication of God's love to us sinners, as if we had never sinned at all. And, that being so, that love cannot stay its working until it has given all that it can bestow or we can receive. God does not do things by halves; and He always gives when He forgives.

Now that is the great truth of the last part of this immortal parable. And it is one of the points in which it differs from, and towers high above, the two preceding ones. The lost sheep was carried back to the pastures, turned loose there, needed no further special care, and began to nibble as if nothing had happened. The lost drachma was simply put back in the woman's purse. But the lost son was pardoned, and, being pardoned, was capable of receiving, and received, greater gifts than he had before. These gifts are very remarkably detailed in the words of our text.

Now, of course, it is always risky to seek for a spiritual interpretation of every point in a parable, many of which points are mere drapery. But, on the other hand, we may very easily fall into the error of treating as insignificant details which really are meant to be full of instruction. And I cannot help thinking--although many would differ from me,--that this detailed enumeration of the gifts to the prodigal is meant to be translated into the terms of spiritual experience. So I desire to look at them as suggesting for us the gifts of God which accompany forgiveness. I take the catalogue as it stands--the Robe, the Ring, the Shoes, the Feast.

**I. First, the Robe.**

Bring forth the best robe, and put it on him. That was the command. This detail, of course, like all the others, refers back to, and casts light upon, the supposed condition of the spendthrift when he came back. There he stood, ragged, with the stain of travel and the stench of the pig-sty upon his garments, some of them, no doubt, remains of the tawdry finery that he had worn in the world; wine-spots, and stains, and filth of all sorts on the rags. The father says, Take them all off him, and put the best robe upon him. What does that mean?

Well, we all know the very familiar metaphor by which qualities of mind, traits of character, and the like are described as being the dress of the spirit. We talk about being arrayed in purity, clad in zeal, clothed with humility, vested with power, and so on. If we turn to Scripture, we find running through it a whole series of instances of this metaphor, which guide us at once to its true meaning. Zechariah saw in vision the high priest standing at the heavenly tribunal, clad in filthy garments. A voice said, Take away the filthy garments from him, and the interpretation is added: Behold! I have caused thine iniquity to pass from thee, and I will clothe thee with a change of raiment. You remember our Lord's parable of the man with a wedding garment. You remember the Apostle Paul's frequent use of the metaphor of putting off the old man, putting on the new. You remember, finally, the visions of the last days, in which the Seer in Patmos saw the armies in heaven that followed their victorious Commander, clothed in fine linen, white and pure, which is the righteousness of the saints. If we put all these together, surely I am not forcing a meaning on a non-significant detail, when I say that here we have shadowed for us the great thought, that the result of the divine forgiveness coming upon a man is that he is clothed with a character which fits him to sit down at his Father's table. They tell us that forgiveness is impossible, because things done must have their consequences, and that character is the slow formation of actions, precipitated, as it were, from our deeds. That is all true. But it does not conflict with this other truth that there may and does come into men's hearts, when they set their faith on Jesus Christ, a new power which transforms the nature and causes old things to pass away.

God's forgiveness revolutionises a life. Similar effects follow even human pardons for small offences. Brute natures are held in by penalties, and to them pardon means impunity, and impunity means licence, and licence means lust. But wherever there is a heart with love to the offended in it, there is nothing that will so fill it with loathing of its past self as the assurance that the offended, though loved, One loves, and is not offended, and that free forgiveness has come. Whether is it the rod or the mother's kiss that makes a child hate its sin most? And if we lift our thoughts to Him, and think how He, up there in the heavens,

Who mightest vengeance best have took,

bends over us in frank, free forgiveness, then surely that, more than all punishments or threatenings or terrors, will cause us to turn away from our evil, and to loathe the sins which are thus forgiven. The prophet went very deep when he said, Thou shalt be ashamed and confounded, and never open thy mouth any more because of thine iniquity, when I am pacified towards thee for all that thou hast done, saith the Lord.

But not only so, there is given along with forgiveness, and wrapped up in it, a new power, which makes all things new, and changes a man. It would be a poor Gospel for me to stand up and preach if I had only to proclaim to men the divine forgiveness; and if that only meant that hell's door was barred and some outward heaven was flung open. But the true Gospel offers forgiveness as preliminary to the bestowal of the highest gifts of God. The pardoned man is stripped of his rags and clothed with a new nature which God Himself bestows.

That is what we all need. We have not all been in the pig-sty; we have not all fallen into gross sin. We have all turned our backs on our Father; we have all wanted to be independent; we have all preferred the far-off land to being near home. And, dear brethren, the character that you have made for yourselves clings to you like the poisoned Nessusshirt to Hercules. You cannot strip it off. You may get part of it away, but you cannot entirely cast it from your limbs, nor free yourselves from the entanglements of its tatters. Go to God, and He will smile away your sin, and His forgiving love will melt the stains and the evil, as the sun this morning drank up the mists; and they who come knowing themselves to be foul, and needing forgiveness, will surely receive from Him the fine linen white and pure, the righteousness of saints.

**II. The Ring.**

This prodigal lad only wanted to be placed in the position of a slave, but his father said, Put a ring on his finger. The ring is an emblem of wealth, position, honour; that is one signification of this gift to the penitent. Still further, it is an ornament to the hand on which it glistens; that is another. It is a sign of delegated authority and of representative character; as when Joseph was exalted to be the second man in Egypt, and Pharaoh's signet ring was plucked off and placed upon his finger. All these thoughts are, as it seems to me, clustered in, and fairly deducible from, this one detail.

Freedom, exaltation, dignity of position are expressed. And that opens up a thought which needs to be set forth with many reservations, and much guarding, but still is true--viz., that, by the mercy and miraculous loving-kindness and quickening power of God in the Gospel, it is possible that the lower a man falls the higher he may rise. I know, of course, that it is better to be innocent than to be cleansed. I know, and every man that looks into his own heart knows, that forgiven sins may leave scars; that the memory may be loaded with many a foul and many a painful remembrance; that the fetters may be stricken off the limbs, but the marks of them, and the way of walking that they compelled, may persist long after deliverance. But I know, too, that redeemed men are higher in final position than angels that never fell; and that, though it is too much to say that the greater the sinner the greater the saint, it still remains true that sin repented and forgiven may be, as it were, an elevation upon which a man may stand to reach higher than, apparently, he otherwise would in the divine life.

And so, though I do not say to any man, Make the experiment; for, indeed, the poorest of us has sins enough to get all the benefit out of repentance and forgiveness which is included in them, yet, if there is any man here--and I hope there is--saying to himself, I have got too low down ever to master this, that, or the other evil; I have stained myself so foully that I cannot hope to have the black marks erased, I say to such; Remember that the man who ended with a ring on his finger, honoured and dignified, was the man that had herded with pigs, and stank, and all but rotted, with his fleshly crimes. And so nobody need doubt but that for him, however low he has gone, and however far he has gone, there is restoration possible to a higher dignity than the pure spirits that never transgressed at any time God's commandment will ever attain; for he who has within himself the experience of repentance, of pardon, and who has come into living contact with Jesus Christ as Redeemer, can teach angels how blessed it is to be a child of God.

Nor less distinctly are the other two things which I have referred to brought out in this metaphor. Not only is the ring the sign of dignity, but it is also the sign of delegated authority and representative character. God sets poor penitents to be His witnesses in His world, and to do His work here. And a ring is an ornament to the hand that wears it; which being translated is this: where God gives pardon, He gives a strange beauty of character, to which, if a man is true to himself, and to his Redeemer, he will assuredly attain. There should be no lives so lovely, none that flash with so many jewelled colours, as the lives of the men and women who have learned what it is to be miserable, what it is to repent, what it is to be forgiven. So, though our hands have been full of blood, as the prophet says, though they have dabbled in all manner of pollution, though they have been the ready instruments of many evil things, we may all hope that, cleansed and whitened, even our hands will not want the lustre of that adornment which the loving father clasped upon the fingers of his penitent boy.

**III. Further, Shoes on his feet.**

No doubt he had come back barefooted and filthy and bleeding, and it was needful for the keepingof the narrative that this detail should appear. But I think it is something more than drapery.

Does it not speak to us of equipment for the walk of life? God does prepare men for future service, and for every step that they have to take, by giving to them His forgiveness for all that is past. The sense of the divine pardon will in itself fit a man, as nothing else will, for running with patience the race that is set before him. God does communicate, along with His forgiveness, to every one who seeks it, actual power to travel on life's common way in cheerful godliness; and his feet are shod with the preparedness of the gospel of peace.

Ah, brethren, life is a rough road for us all, and for those whose faces are set towards duty, and God, and self-denial, it is especially so, though there are many compensating circumstances. There are places where sharp flints stick up in the path and cut the feet. There are places where rocks jut out for us to stumble over. There are all the trials and sorrows that necessarily attend upon our daily lives, and which sometimes make us feel as if our path were across heated ploughshares, and every step was a separate agony. God will give us, if we go to Him for pardon, that which will defend us against the pains and the sorrows of life. The bare foot is cut by that which the shod foot tramples upon unconscious.

There are foul places on all our paths, over which, when we pass, if we have not something else than our own naked selves, we shall certainly contract defilement. God will give to the penitent man, if he will have it, that which will keep his feet from soil, even when they walk amidst filth. And if, at any time, notwithstanding the defence, some mud should stain the foot, and he that is washed needs again to wash his feet, the Master, with the towel and the basin, will not be far away.

There are enemies and dangers in life. A very important part of the equipment of the soldier in antiquity was the heavy boot, which enabled him to stand fast, and resist the rush of the enemy. God will give to the penitent man, if he will have it, that which will set his foot upon a rock, and establish his goings, and which will make him able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand.

Brethren, defence, stability, shielding from pains, and protection against evil are all included in this great promise, which each of us may realise, if we will, for ourselves.

**IV. Lastly, the Feast.**

Now that comes into view in the parable, mainly as teaching us the great truth that Heaven keeps holiday, when some poor waif comes shrinking back to his Father. But I do not touch upon that truth now, though it is the main significance of this last part of the story.

The prodigal was half starving, and the fatted calf was killed for him, as his ill-conditioned brother grumbled. Remember what it was that drove him back--not his heart, nor his conscience, but his stomach. He did not bethink himself to go back, because dormant filial affection woke up, or because a sense that he had been wrong stirred in him, but because he was hungry; and well he might be, when the husks that the swine did eatwere luxuries beyond his reach. Thank God for the teaching that even so low a motive as that is accepted by God; and that, if a man goes back, even for no better reason--as long as he does go back, he will be welcomed by the Father. This poor boy was quite content to sink his sonship for the sake of a loaf; and all that he wanted was to stay his hunger. So he had to learn that he could not get bread on the terms that he desired, and that what he wished most was not what he needed first. He had to be forgiven and bathed in the outflow of his father's love before he could be fed. And, being thus received, he could not fail to be fed. So the message for us is, first, forgiveness, and then every hunger of the heart satisfied; all desires met; every needful nourishment communicated, and the true bread ours for ever, if we choose to eat. The meek shall eat and be satisfied.

I need not draw the picture--that picture of which there are many originals sitting in these pews before me--of the men that go for ever roaming with a hungry heart, through all the regions of life separate from God; and whether they seek their nourishment in the garbage of the sty, or whether fastidiously they look for it in the higher nutriment of mind and intellect and heart, still are condemned to be unfilled.

Brethren, Why do you spend your money for that ... which satisfies not?Here is the true way for all desires to be appeased. Go to God in Jesus Christ for forgiveness, and then everything that you need shall be yours. I counsel thee to buy of Me ... white raiment that thou mayest be clothed. He that eateth of this bread shall live for ever.