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

**LUKE-065**. **GOD'S SLAVES by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"9.* *Doth He thank that servant because he did the things that were commanded him! I trow not. 10. So likewise ye, when ye shall have done all those things which are commanded you, say, We are unprofitable servants: we have done that which was our duty to do.--."*

*Luke 17:9-10*

There are two difficulties about these words. One is their apparent entire want of connection with what precedes--viz., the disciplesprayer, Lord, increase our faith, and the other is the harshness and severity of tone which marks them, and the view of the less attractive side of man's relation to God which is thrown into prominence in them. He must be a very churlish master who never says Thank you, however faithful his servant's obedience may be. And he must be a very inconsiderate master, who has only another kind of duty to lay upon the shoulders of the servant that has come in after a long day's ploughing and feeding of cattle. Perhaps, however, the one difficulty clears away the other, and if we keep firm hold of the thought that the words of my text, and those which are associated with them, are an answer to the prayer, Lord, increase our faith, the stern and somewhat repelling characteristics of the words may somewhat change.

**I. So I look, first, at the husk of apparent harshness and severity.**

The relation between master and hired servant is not the one that is in view, but the relation between a master and the slave who is his property, who has no rights, who has no possessions, whose life and death and everything connected with him are at the absolute disposal of his master. It is a foul and wicked relation when existing between men, and it has been full of cruelty and atrocities. But Jesus Christ lays His hand upon it, and says, That is the relation between men and God; that is the relation between men and Me.

And what is involved therein? Absolute authority; so that the slave is but, as it were, an animated instrument in the hand of the master, with no will of his own, and no rights and no possessions. That is not all of our relation to God, blessed be His Name! But that is in our relation to Him, and the highest title that a man can have is the title which the Apostles in after days bound upon their foreheads as a crown of honour--A slave of Jesus Christ.

Then, if that relation is laid as being the basis of all our connection with God, whatever else there may be also involved, these two things which in the human relation are ugly and inconsiderate, and argue a very churlish and selfish nature on the part of the human master, belong essentially to our relation to God. Which of you, having a servant, ploughing or feeding cattle, will say unto him ... when he has come from the field, Go (immediately) and sit down to meat, and will not rather say unto him, Make ready wherewith I may sup, and gird thyself and serve me, till I have eaten and drunken: and afterward thou shalt eat and drink?You will get your supper by-and-by, but you are here to work, says the master, and when you have finished one task, that does not involve that you are to rest; it involves only that you are to take up another. And however wearisome has been the ploughing amongst the heavy clods all day long, and tramping up and down the furrows, when you come in you are to clean yourself up, and get my supper ready, and afterward thou shalt eat and drink.

As I have said, such a speech would argue a harsh human master, but is there not a truth which is not harsh in it in reference to us and God? Duty never ends. The eternal persistence through life of the obligation to service is what is taught us here, as being inherent in the very relation between the Lord and Owner of us all and us His slaves. Moralists and irreligious teachers say grand things about the eternal sweep of the great law of duty. The Christian thought is the higher one, Thou hast beset me behind and before, and laid Thine hand upon me, and wherever I am I am under obligation to serve Thee, and no past record of work absolves me from the work of the present. From the cradle to the grave I walk beneath an all-encompassing, overarching firmament of duty. As long as we draw breath we are bound to the service of Him whose slaves we are, and whose service is perfect freedom.

Such is the bearing of this apparently repulsive representation of our text, which is not so repulsive if you come to think about it. It does not in the least set aside the natural craving for recreation and relaxation and repose. It does not overlook God's obligation to keep His slave alive, and in good condition for doing His work, by bestowing upon him the things that are needful for him, but it does meet that temptation which comes to us all to take that rest which circumstances may make manifestly not God's will, and it says to us, Forget the things that are behind, and reach forth unto the things that are before. You have done a long day's work with plough or sheep-crook. The reward for work is more work. Come away indoors now, and nearer the Master, prepare His table. Which of you, having a servant, will not do so with him?And that is how He does with us.

Then, the next thought here, which, as I say, has a harsh exterior, and a bitter rind, is that one of the slave doing his work, and never getting so much as thank youfor it. But if you lift this interpretation too, into the higher region of the relation between God and His slaves down here, a great deal of the harshness drops away. For what does it come to? Just to this, that no man among us, by any amount or completeness of obedience to the will of God establishes claims on God for a reward. You have done your duty--so much the better for you, but is that any reason why you should be decorated and honoured for doing it? You have done no more than your duty. So, likewise, ye, when ye have done all things that are commanded you--even if that impossible condition were to be realised--'say we are unprofitable servants; not in the bad sense in which the word is sometimes used, but in the accurate sense of not having brought any profit or advantage, more than was His before, to the Master whom we have thus served. It is a blessed thing for a man to call himself an unprofitable servant; it is an awful thing for the Master to call him one. If we say we are unprofitable servants, we shall be likely to escape the solemn words from the Lord's lips: Take ye away the unprofitable servant, and cast him into outer darkness. There are two that may use the word, Christ the Judge, and man the judged, and if the man will use it, Christ will not. If we judge ourselves we shall not be judged.

Now, although, as I have said about the other part of this text, it is not meant to exhaust our relations to God, or to say the all-comprehensive word about the relation of obedience to blessedness; it is meant to say

Merit lives from man to man,

And not from man, O Lord! to Thee.

No one can reasonably build upon his own obedience, or his own work, nor claim as by right, for reward, heaven or other good. So my text is the anticipation of Paul's teaching about the impossibility of a man's being saved by his works, and it cuts up by the root, not only the teaching as to a treasure of merits of the saints, and works of supererogation, and the like; but it tells us, too, that we must beware of the germs of that self-complacent way of looking at ourselves and our own obedience, as if they had anything at all to do with our buying either the favour of God, or the rewards of the faithful servant.

**II. Now, all that I have been saying may sound very harsh. Let us take a second step, and try if we can find out the kernel of grace in the harsh husk.**

I hold fast by the one clue that Jesus Christ is here replying to the Apostle's prayer, Lord, increase our faith. He had been laying down some very hard regulations for their conduct, and, naturally, when they felt how difficult it would be to come within a thousand miles of what He had been bidding them, they turned to Him with that prayer. It suggests that faith is there, in living operation, or they would not have prayed to Him for its increase. And how does He go about the work of increasing it? In two ways, one of which does not enter into my present subject. First, by showing the disciples the power of faith, in order to stimulate them to greater effort for its possession. He promised that they might say to the fig tree, Be thou plucked up and planted in the sea, and it should obey them. The second way was by this context of which I am speaking now. How does it bear upon the Apostlesprayer? What is there in this teaching about the slave and his master, and the slave's work, and the incompatibility of the notion of reward with the slave's service, to help to strengthen faith? There is this that this teaching beats down every trace of self-confidence, and if we take it in and live by it, makes us all feel that we stand before God, whatever have been our deeds of service, with no claims arising from any virtue or righteousness of our own. We come empty-handed. If the servant who has done all that is commanded has yet to say, I can ask nothing from Thee, because I have done it, for it was all in the line of my duty, what are we to say, who have done so little that was commanded, and so much that was forbidden?

So, you see, the way to increased faith is not by any magical communication from Christ, as the Apostles thought, but by taking into our hearts, and making operative in our lives, the great truth that in us there is nothing that can make a claim upon God, and that we must cast ourselves, as deserving nothing, wholly into His merciful hands, and find ourselves held up by His great unmerited love. Get the bitter poison root of self-trust out of you, and then there is some chance of getting the wholesome emotion of absolute reliance on Him into you. Jesus Christ, if I might use a homely metaphor, in these words pricks the bladder of self-confidence which we are apt to use to keep our heads above water. And it is only when it is pricked, and we, like the Apostle, feel ourselves beginning to sink, that we fling out a hand to Him, and clutch at His outstretched hand, and cry, Lord, save me, I perish!One way to increase our faith is to be rooted and grounded in the assurance that duty is perennial, and that our own righteousness establishes no claim whatever upon God.

**III. Finally, we note the higher view into which, by faith, we come.**

I have been saying, with perhaps vain repetition, that the words of our text and context do not exhaust the whole truth of man's relation to God. They do exhaust the truth of the relation of God to any man that has not faith in his heart, because such a man is a slave in the worst sense, and any obedience that he renders to God's will externally is the obedience of a reluctant will, and is hard and harsh, and there is no end to it, and no good from it. But if we accept the position, and recognise our own impotence, and non-desert, and humbly say, Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but by His mercy He saves us, then we come into a large place. The relation of master and slave does not cover all the ground then. Henceforth, I call you not slaves, but friends, And when the wearied slave comes into the house, the new task is not a new burden, for he is a son as well as a slave; but the work is a delight, and it is a joy to have something more to do for his Father. If our service is the service of sons, sweetened by love, then there will be abundant thanks from the Father, who is not only our owner, but our lover.

For Christian service--that is to say, service based upon faith and rendered in love--does minister delight to our Father in heaven, and He Himself has called it an odour of a sweet smell, acceptable unto God. And if our service on earth has been thus elevated and transformed from the compulsory obedience of a slave to the joyful service of a son, then our reception when at sundown the plough is left in the furrow and we come into the house will be all changed too. Which of you, having a servant, will say to him, Go and sit down to meat, and will not rather say to him, Make ready whilst I eat and drink?That is the law for earth, but for heaven it is this, Blessed are those servants whom the Lord, when He cometh, shall find watching. Verily, I say unto you, that He shall gird Himself, and make them to sit down to meat, and will come forth and serve them. The husk is gone now, I think, and the kernel is left. Loving service is beloved by God, and rewarded by the ministering, as a servant of servants, to us by Him who is King of kings and Lord of lords.

Lord, increase our faith, that we may so serve Thee on earth, and so be served by Thee in heaven.