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

**LUKE-071**. **THE TRADING SERVANTS by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"Then came the first, saying, Lord, thy pound hath gained ten pounds.... And the second came, saying, Lord, thy pound hath gained five pounds."*

*Luke 19:16, 18*

The Evangelist, contrary to his usual practice, tells us what was the occasion of this parable. It was spoken at Jericho, on our Lord's last journey to Jerusalem, Bethany was but a day's march distant; Calvary but a week ahead. An unusual tension of spirit marked our Lord's demeanour, and was noticed by the disciples with awe. It infected them, and the excitable crowd, which was more than usually excitable because on its way to the passover festival. The air was electric, and everybody felt that something was impending. They thought that the kingdom of God should immediately appear. So Christ spoke this parable to damp down that expectation which might easily flash up into the flame of rebellion. He tells them His real programme. He was to go a long way off to receive the kingdom. That was a familiar experience amongst the nations tributary to Rome, and more than one of the Herodian family had passed through it. In the meantime there was to be a period of expectancy. It was to be a long time, for he had to go to a far country, and it was to be extended enough for the servants to turn their money over many times during His absence. When He did return it was not to do what they expected. They thought that the kingdom meant Jewish lordship over subject nations. He teaches them that it meant the destruction of the rebellious citizens, and a rigid scrutiny of the servantsfaithfulness.

Now, the words of my two texts bring out in connection with this outline of the future some large lessons which I desire to draw.

**I. Notice the small capital that the servants receive to trade with.**

It was a pound apiece, which, numismatic authorities tell us, is somewhat about the same value as some £6 odd of English money; though, of course, the purchasing power would be considerably greater. A small amount, and an equal amount to every servant--these are the two salient points of this parable. They make the broad distinction between it and the other parable, which is often mixed up with it, the parable of the talents. There, instead of the amount being excessively small, it is exceedingly great; for a talent was worth some £400, and ten talents would be £4000, a fair capital for a man to start with. The other point of difference between the two parables, which belongs to the essence of each, is that while the gift in the one case is identical, in the other case it is graduated and different.

Now, to suppose that these are but two varying versions of the same parable, which the Evangelists have manipulated is, in my judgment, to be blind to the plainest of the lessons to be drawn from them.

There are two sorts of gifts. In one, all Christian men, the Master's servants, are alike; in another, they differ. Now, what is the thing in which all Christians are alike? What gift do they all possess equally; rich and poor, largely endowed or slenderly equipped; talented--as we use the word from the parable--or not? The rich man and the poor, the wise man and the foolish, the cultured man and the ignorant, the Fijian and the Englishman, have one thing alike--the message of salvation which we call the Gospel of the blessed Lord. That is the pound. We all stand upon an equal platform there, however differently we are endowed in respect of capacities and other matters. All have it; and all have the same.

Now if that is the interpretation of this parable, there are considerations that flow from that thought, and on which I would dwell for a moment.

The first of them is the apparent smallness of the gift. You may feel a difficulty in accepting that explanation, and may have been saying to yourselves that it cannot be correct, because Jesus Christ would never compare the unspeakable gift of His message of salvation through Him, to that paltry sum. But throw yourselves back to the moment of utterance, and I think you will feel the pathos and power of the metaphor. Here was that handful of disciples set in the midst of a hostile world, dead against them, with its banded superstitions, venerable idolatries, systematised philosophies, the force of the mightiest instruments of material power that the world had ever seen, in the organisation and military power of Rome. And there stood twelve Galilean men, with their simple, unlettered message; one poor pound, and that was all. The foolishness of preaching, the message which to the Jews was a stumbling-block, and to the Greeks was folly, was all that they were equipped with. Their Master, who left them to seek a Kingdom, had so little to bestow, before He received His crown, that all that He could spare them was that small sum. They had to go into business in a very poor way. They had to be content to do a very insignificant retail trade. The foolishness of God is wiser than men; and the weakness of God is stronger than men. The old experience of the leather sling and the five stones out of the brook, in the hand of the stripling, that made short work of the brazen armour of the giant, and penetrated with a whizz into his thick skull, and laid him prostrate, was to be repeated. He called his servants, and gave them--a pound apiece! If you and I, Christian men and women, were true to the Master's legacy, and believed that we have in it more wealth than the treasures of wisdom and knowledge or force which the world has laid up, we should find that our mite was more than they all have in their possession.

Further, the texts suggest the purpose for which the pound is given. The servants had to live on it themselves, no doubt. So have we. They had to trade with it. So have we. Now that means two things. We get the Gospel, not as some of us lazily suppose, in order to secure that we shall not be punished for our past sins whilst we live, and go to heaven when we die. We get it, not only to enjoy its consolations and its sweetness, but to do business with.

And there are two ways in which this trading is to be done by us. The main one is the honest application of the principles and powers of the Gospel to the moulding of our own characters, and the making us better, purer, gentler, more heavenly-minded, and more Christlike. That is the first trading that we have to carry on with the Word. We get it not for an indolent assent, as so many of us misuse it. We receive it not merely to say, Oh I believe it, and there an end, but that we may bring it to bear upon all our conduct, and that it may be the chief formative influence in our characters. Christian people! is that what you do with your Christianity? Is the Gospel moulding you, hour by hour, moment by moment? Have you brought all its great truths to bear upon your daily lives? Have you inwrought its substance into, not merely your understandings or your emotions, but your daily conduct? Is it indeed the life of your lives, and the leaven that is leavening your whole character? You have it to trade with; see that you do not wrap it in a napkin, and stow it idly away in some corner.

Then there is the other way of trading and that is, telling it to others. That is an obligation incumbent on all Christians. There may be differences in regard to other gifts, which determine the manner in which each shall use the equal gift which we all possess alike. But these are of subordinate importance. The main thing is to feel that the possession of Christian faith, which is our way of receiving the pound, carries with it indissolubly the obligation of Christian evangelism. However it may be discharged, discharged it is to be, by every true servant. I am sometimes half disposed to think that it would have been better for the Church if there had never been any men in my position, on whom the mass of unspiritual, idle because busy, and silent because little-loving, Christian professors contentedly roll the whole obligation to preach God's Gospel. My brethren, the world is not going to be evangelised by officials. Until all Christian people wake up to the sense that they have the poundto trade with, there will be nothing adequate done to bring the world to the obedience and the love of Jesus Christ. You say you have the Gospel; if you have it what are you doing with it?

Self-centred Christianity, if such a thing were possible, is a mistake. It is generally a sham; it is always a crime. A man that puts away his pound, and never goes out and says, Come, share with me in the wealth that I have found in Jesus Christwill be like a miser that puts his hoardings into an old stocking, and hides it in the ground somewhere. When he goes to dig it up, he is only too likely to find that all the coins have slipped out. If you want to keep your Christianity, let the air into it. If you want it to increase, sow it. There are hosts of you who would be far happier Christian people, if you came out of your shells and traded with your pound.

**II. Observe the varying profits of the trading.**

The one man says, Thy pound hath gained ten pounds. The other says, Thy pound hath gained five pounds. And the others who are not mentioned, no doubt, had also varying results to present. Now that inequality of profits from an equal capital to start with, is but a picturesque way of saying what is, alas! too obviously true, that Christian people do not all stand on the same level in regard to the use they have made of, and the benefits they have derived from, the one equal gift which was bestowed upon them. It is the same to every one at the beginning, but differences develop as they go on. One man makes twice as much out of it as another does.

Now, let us distinctly understand what sort of differences these are which our Lord signalises here. Let me clear away a mistake which may interfere with the true lessons of this parable, that the differences in question are the superficial ones in apparent results which follow from difference of endowments, or from difference of influential position. That is the kind of meaning that is often attached to the ten poundsor the five poundsin the text. We think that the ten pounder is the man who has been able to do some large spiritual work for Jesus Christ, that fills the world with its greatness, the man who has been set in some most conspicuous place, and by reason of intellectual ability or other talent has been able to gather in many souls into the kingdom; but that is not Christ's way of estimating. We should be going dead in the teeth of everything that He teaches if we thought that such as these were the differences intended. No, no! Every man that co-operates in a great work with equal diligence and devotion has an equal place in his eyes. The soldier that clapped Luther on the back as he was going into the Diet of Worms, and said, You have a bigger fight to fight than we ever had; cheer up, little monk!stands on the same level as the great reformer, if what he did was done from the game motive and with as full consecration of himself. The old law of Israel states the true principle of Christian recompense: they that abide by the stuffhave the same share in the spoil as they that go down into the battle. All servants who have exercised equal faithfulness and equal diligence stand on the same level and have the same success; no matter how different may be their estimation in the eyes of men; no matter how different may be the conspicuousness of the places that they fill in the eyes of the world whilst they live, or in the records of the Church when they are dead. Equal diligence will issue in equal results in the development of character, and the only reason for the diversity of results is the diversity of faithfulness and of zeal in trading with the pound.

Notice, too, before I go further, how all who trade make profits. There are no bad debts in that business. There are no investments that result in a loss. Everybody that goes into it makes something by it; which is just to say that any man who is honest and earnest in the attempt to utilise the powers of Christ's Gospel for his own culture, or for the world's good, will succeed in reality, however he may seem to fail in appearance. There are no commercial failures in this trading. The man with his ten pounds of profit made them because he worked hardest. The man that made the five made all that his work entitled him to. There was no one who came and said, Lord! I put thy pound into my little shop, and I did my best with it, and it is all gone!Every Christian effort is crowned with success.

**III. Lastly, we have here the final declaration of profits.**

The master has come back. He is a king now, but he is the master still, and he wants to know what has become of the money that was left in the servants' hands. Now, that is but a metaphorical way of bringing to our minds that which we cannot conceive of without metaphor--viz., the retribution that lies beyond the grave for us all. Although we cannot conceive it without metaphor, we may reach, through the metaphor to some apprehension, at any rate, of the facts that lie behind it. There are two points in reference to this final declaration of profits suggested here.

The first is this, that all the profit is ascribed to the capital. Neither of the two men say: I, with thy pound, have gained, but Thy pound hath gained. That is accurately true. For if I accept, and live by, any great moral truth or principle, it is the principle or the truth that is the real productive cause of the change in my life and character. I, by my acceptance of it, simply put the belt on the drum that connects my loom with the engine, but it is the engine that drives the looms and the shuttle, and brings out the web at last. And so, Christian people who, with God's grace in their hearts, have utilised the pound, and thereby made themselves Christlike, have to say, It was not I, but Christ in me. It was the Gospel, and not my faith in the Gospel, that wrought this change. Is it your teeth or your dinner that nourishes you? Is it the Gospel or your trust in the Gospel that is the true cause of your sanctifying?

With regard to the other aspect of this trading, the same thing is true. Is it my word or Christ's Word ministered by me that helps any of my hearers who are helped? Surely! surely! there is no question about that. It is the poundthat gains the pounds. Paul planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase. So, then, neither is he that planteth anything nor he that watereth, but God that giveth the increase.

The other consideration suggested by these words is the exact knowledge of the precise results of a life, which is possessed at last. Each servant knew precisely what was the net outcome of his whole activity. That is exactly what we do not know here, and never shall, and never can know. But yonder all illusions will have vanished; and there will be two sorts of disillusionising then. Men, for instance, of my profession, whose names are familiar, and who hold high places in the esteem of the Church, and may be tempted to suppose that they have done a great deal--I am afraid that many of us will find, when we get yonder, that we have not done nearly so much as our admirers in this world, and we ourselves, were sometimes tempted to think that we had done. The searching light that comes in will show a great many seamy places in the cloth that looks very sound when it is inspected in the twilight. And there will be another kind of disillusionising. Many a man has said, Lord! I have laboured in vain, and spent my strength for nought, who will find out that he was mistaken, and that where he saw failure there were solid results; that where he thought the grain had perished in the furrows, it had sprung up and borne fruit unto life everlasting. Lord! when saw we Thee in prison, and visited Thee?We never knew that we had done anything of the sort. Behold! I was left alone, said the widowed Jerusalem when she was restored to her husband, these--children that have gathered round me--where had they been?We shall know, for good or bad, exactly the results of our lives.

We shall have to tell them. The slothful servant, too, was under this compulsion of absolute honesty. If he had not been so, do you think he would have ventured to stand up before his master, a king now, and insult him to his face? But he had to turn himself inside out, and tell then what he had thought in his inmost heart. So every one of us shall give an account of himself to God; and like a man in the bankruptcy court, we shall have to explain our books, and go into all our transactions. We are working in the dark today. Our work will be seen as it is, in the light. The coral reef rises in the ocean, and the creatures that made it do not see it. The ocean will be drained away, and the reef will stand up sheer and distinct.

My brother! I counsel thee to buy of me gold tried in the fire--and when you have bought your pound, see that you use it; for it is required in stewards that a man be found faithful.