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

**LUKE-072**. **THE REWARDS OF THE TRADING SERVANTS by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"Because thou hast been faithful in a very little, have thou authority over ten cities... Be thou also over five cities."*

*Luke 19:17, 19*

The relation between this parable of the pounds and the other of the talents has often been misunderstood, and is very noteworthy. They are not two editions of one parable variously manipulated by the Evangelists, but they are two parables presenting two kindred and yet diverse aspects of one truth. They are neither identical, as some have supposed, nor contradictory, as others have imagined; but they are complementary. The parable of the talents represents the servants as receiving different endowments; one gets five; another two; another one. They make the same rate of profit with their different endowments. The man that turned his two talents into four did just as well as he that turned his five into ten. In either case the capital is doubled. Since the diligence is the same, the rewards are the same, and to each is given the identical same eulogium and the same entrance into the joy of his Lord. So the lesson of that parable is that, however unequal are our endowments, there may be as much diligence shown in the use of the smallest as in the greatest, and where that is the case, the man with the small endowments will stand on the same level of recompense as the man with the large.

But that is not all. This parable comes in to complete the thoughts. Here all the servants get the same gift, the one pound, but they make different profits out of it, one securing twice as much as the other. And, inasmuch as the diligence has been different, the rewards are different. So the lesson of this parable is that unequal faithfulness in the use of the same opportunities results in unequal retribution and reward. Unequal faithfulness, I say, because, of course, in both parables it is presupposed that the factor in producing the profit is not any accidental circumstance, but the earnestness and faithfulness of the servant. Christ does not pay for results; He pays for motives. And it is not because the man has made a certain number of pounds, but because in making them he has shown a certain amount of faithfulness, that he is rewarded. Christ does not say, Well done! good and successful servant, but Well done! good and faithful servant.

So, keeping these two sides of the one truth in view, I desire now to draw out two or three of the lessons which seem to me to lie in the principle laid down in my texts, of the unequal results of the unequal diligence of these servants.

**I. I would note the solemn view of this present life that underlies the whole.**

Thou hast been faithful in a very little; have thou authority over five cities. Well, that rests upon the thought that all our present life here is a stewardship, which in its nature is preparatory to larger work yonder. And that is the point of view from which alone it is right to look at, and possible to understand, this else unintelligible and bewildering life on earth. Clearly enough, to anybody that has eyes in his head, moral ends are supreme in man's relation to nature, and in man's life. We are here for the sake of making character, and of acquiring aptitudes and capacities which shall be exercised hereafter. The whole of our earthly career is the exercise of stewardship in regard to all the gifts with which we have been entrusted, in order that by the right exercise of that stewardship we may develop ourselves and acquire powers.

Now if it is clear that the whole meaning and end of the present life are to make character, and that we have to do with the material and the transient only, in order that, like the creatures that build up the coral reefs, we may draw from the ever-varying waves of the ocean that welters around us solid substance which we can pile up into an enduring monument--is this process of making character, and developing ourselves, to be cut short by such a contemptible thing as the death of the body? One very distinguished evolutionist, who has been forced onwards from his position to a kind of theism, declares that he is driven to a belief in immortality because he must believe in the reasonableness of God's work. And it seems to me that if indeed--as is plainly the case--moral ends are supreme in our life's history, it brings utter intellectual bewilderment and confusion to suppose that these ends are kept in view up till the moment of death, and that then down comes the guillotine and cuts off all. God does not take the rough ore out of the mine, and deal with it, and change it to polished steel, and shape His weapons, and then take them when they are at their highest temper and their sharpest edge, and break them across His knee. No! if here we are shaped, it is because yonder there is work for the tool.

So all here is apprenticeship, and the issues of to-day are recorded in eternity. We are like men perched up in a signal-box by the side of the line; we pull over a lever here, and it lifts an arm half a mile off. The smallest wheel upon one end of a shaft may cause another ten times its diameter to revolve, at the other end of the shaft through the wall there. Here we prepare, yonder we achieve.

**II. Note the consequent littleness and greatness of this present.**

Thou hast been faithful in a very little. Some of you may remember a recent sermon on the previous part of this parable, in which I tried to bring out an explanation of the small sum with which these servants were entrusted--the pound apiece for their little retail businesses--and found reason to believe that the interpretation of that gift was the Gospel of Jesus Christ which, in comparison with the world's wisdom and philosophies and material forces, seemed such a very insignificant thing. If we keep that interpretation in view in treating my present text, then there is hinted to us the contrast between the necessary limitations and incompletenesses even of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ which we have here, and the flood of glory and of light, which shall pour upon our eyes when the veil of flesh and sense has dropped away. Here we know in part; here, even with the intervention of the Eternal and Incarnate Word of God, the Revealer of the Father, we see as in a glass darkly; there face to face. The magnificences and the harmonies of that great revelation of God in Jesus Christ, which transcends all human thought and all worldly wisdom, are but a point, in comparison with the continent of illumination which shall come to us hereafter. The moon that rules the nightis the revelation that we have to-day, the reflection and echo of the sun that will rule the unsetting day of the heavens.

But I pass from that aspect of the words before us to the other, which, I suppose, is rather to be kept in view, in which the faithfulness in a very little points to the smallness of this present, as measured against that infinite future to which it conducts. Much has been said upon that subject, which is very antagonistic to the real ideas of Christianity. Life here, and this present, have been depreciated unduly, untruly, and unthankfully. And harm has been done, not only to the men who accept that estimate, but to the world that scoffs at it. There is nothing in the Bible, which is at all in sympathy with the so-called religious depreciation of the present, but there is this--the things that are seen are temporal; the things that are unseen are eternal. The lower hills look high when beheld from the flat plain that stretches on this side of them; but, if the mist lifts, the great white peaks come out beyond them, glittering in the sunshine, and with the untrodden snows on their inaccessible pinnacles; and nobody thinks about the green foothills, with the flowers upon them, any more. Brethren, think away the mist, for you can, and open your eyes, and see the snow-clad hills of eternity, and then you will understand how low is the elevation of the heights in the foreground. The greatness of the future makes the present little, but the little present is great, because its littleness is the parent of the great future. The child is father of the man; and earth's narrow range widens out into the infinitude of eternity and of heaven. The only thing that gives real greatness and sublimity to our mortal life is its being the vestibule to another. Historically you will find that, wherever faith in a future life has become dim, as it has become dim in large sections of the educated classes to-day, there the general tone of strenuous endeavour has dropped, and the fatal feeling of It is not worth whilebegins to creep over society. Is life worth living?is the question that is asked on all sides of us to-day. And the modern recrudescence of pessimism has along with it, as one of the main thoughts which cut the nerves of effort, doubt of, and disbelief in, a future. It is because the very little opens out into the immeasurably great, and the passing moments tick us onwards into an unpassing eternity, that the moments are worth living through, and the fleeting insignificances of earth's existence become solemn and majestic as the portals of heaven.

**III. Notice the future form of activity prepared for by faithful trading.**

Thou hast been faithful in a very little; have thou authority over ten cities. Now I do not need to spend a word in dwelling on the contrast between the two pictures of the huckster with his little shop and the pound of capital to begin with, and the vizier that has control of ten of the cities of his master. That is too plain to need any enforcement. We are all here, all us Christian people especially, like men that keep a small shop, in a back street, with a few trivial things in the window, but we are heirs of a kingdom. That is what Christ wants us to lay to heart, so that the little shop shall not seem so very small, and its smoky obscurity shall be irradiated by true visions of what it will lead to.

Nor do I wish to risk any kind of fanciful and precarious speculations as to the manner and the sphere of the authority that is here set forth; only I would keep to one or two plain things. Faithfulness here prepares for participation in Christ's authority hereafter. For we are not to forget that whilst the master, the nobleman, was away seeking the kingdom, all that he could give his servants was the little stock-in-trade with which he started them, and that it is because he has won his kingdom that he is able to dispense to them the larger gifts of dominion over the ten and the five cities. The authority is delegated, but it is more than that-- it is shared. For it is participation in, and not merely delegation from, the King and His rule, that is set forth in this and in other places of Scripture, for they shall sit down with Me on My throne, even as I also overcame and am set down with My Father on His throne.

If, then, the rule set forth, in whatever sphere and in whatever fashion it may be exercised, is participation in Christ's authority, let us not forget that therefore it is a rule of which the manifestation is service. In heaven as on earth, and for the Lord in heaven as for the Lord on earth, and for the servants in heaven as for the servants on earth, the law stands irrefragable and eternal--If any man will be chief among you, let him be your minister. The authority over the ten cities is the capacity and opportunity of serving and helping every citizen in them all. What that help may be let us leave. It is better to be ignorant than to speculate about matters where there is no possibility of certainty. Ignorance is more impressive than knowledge, only be sure that no dignity can live amidst the pure light of the heavens, except after the fashion of the dignity of the Lord of all, who there, as here, is the servant of all.

But there is a thought in connection with this great though dim revelation of the future, which may well be laid to heart by us. And that is, that however close and direct the dependence on, and the communion with, Jesus Christ, the King of all His servants, in that future state is, it shall not be so close and direct as to exclude room for the exercise of brotherly sympathy and brotherly aid. We shall have Christ for our life and our light and our glory. But there, as here, we shall help one another to have Him more fully, and to understand Him more perfectly. What further lies in these great words, I do not venture to guess. Enough to know that Christ will be all in all, and that Christ in each will help the others to know Christ more fully.

Only remember, we have to take this great conception of the future as being one that implies largely increased and ennobled activity. A great deal of very cheap ridicule has been cast upon the Christian conception of the future life as if it was an eternity of idleness and of repose. Of repose, yes; of idleness, no! For it is no sinecure to be the governor of ten cities. There will be a good deal of work to be done, in order to discharge that office properly. Only it will be work that does not disturb repose, and at one and the same moment His servants will serve in constant activity, and gaze upon His face in calm contemplation. Christ's session at the right hand of God does not interfere with Christ's continual activity here. And, in like manner, His servants shall rest from their labours, but not from their work; they shall serve Him undisturbed, and shall repose, but not idly.

**IV. Lastly, our texts remind us of the variety in recompense which corresponds to diversity in faithfulness.**

I need but say a word about that. The one man gets his ten cities because his faithfulness has brought in ten pounds. The other gets five, corresponding to his faithfulness. As I said, our Lord pays, not for results, except in so far as these are conditioned and secured by the diligence of His servants. And so we come to the old familiar, and yet too often forgotten, conception of degrees in dignity, degrees in nearness to Him. That thought runs all through the New Testament representations of a future life, sometimes more clearly, sometimes more obscurely, but generally present. It is in entire accordance with the whole conception of that future, because the Christian notion of it is not that it is an arbitrary reward, but that it is the natural outcome of the present; and, of course, therefore, varying according to the present, of which it is the outcome. We get what we have wrought for. We get what we are capable of receiving, and what we are capable of receiving depends upon what has been our faithfulness here.

Now, that is perfectly consistent with the other side of the truth which the twin parable sets forth--viz., that the recompenses of the future are essentially one. All the servants, who were entrusted with the Talents, received the same eulogium, and entered into the same joy of their Lord. That is one side of the truth. And the other is, that the degree in which Christian people, when they depart hence, possess the one gift of eternal life, and Christ-shared joy is conditioned by their faithfulness and diligence here. Do not let the Gospel that says The gift of God is eternal lifemake you forget the completing truths, that the measure in which a man possesses that eternal life depends on his fitness for it, and that fitness depends on his faithfulness of service and his union with his Lord.

We obscure this great truth often by reason of the way in which we preach the deeper truth on which it rests--forgiveness and acceptance all unmerited, through faith in Jesus Christ. But the two things are not contradictory; they are complementary. No man will be faithful as a steward who is not full of faith as a penitent sinner. No man will enter into the joy of his Lord, who does not enter in through the gate of penitence and trust, but, having entered, we are ranked according to the faithfulness of our service and diligence of stewardship. Wherefore, giving all diligence, make your calling and election sure, for so an entrance shall be ministered unto you abundantly into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.