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

**MARK-005**. **A PARABLE IN A MIRACLE by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"40.* *And there came a leper to Him, beseeching Him, and kneeling down to Him, and saying unto Him, If Thou wilt, Thou canst make me clean. 41. And Jesus, moved with compassion, put forth His hand, and touched him, and saith unto him, I will; he thou clean. 42. And as soon as He had spoken, immediately the leprosy departed from him, and he was cleansed."*

*Mark 1:40-42*

Christ's miracles are called wonders--that is, deeds which, by their exceptional character, arrest attention and excite surprise. Further, they are called mighty works--that is, exhibitions of superhuman power. They are still further called signs--that is, tokens of His divine mission. But they are signs in another sense, being, as it were, parables as well as miracles, and representing on the lower plane of material things the effects of His working on men's spirits. Thus, His feeding of the hungry speaks of His higher operation as the Bread of Life. His giving sight to the blind foreshadows His illumination of darkened minds. His healing of the diseased speaks of His restoration of sick souls. His stilling of the tempest tells of Him as the Peace-bringer for troubled hearts; and His raising of the dead proclaims Him as the Life-giver, who quickens with the true life all who believe on Him. This parabolic aspect of the miracles is obvious in the case before us. Leprosy received exceptional treatment under the Mosaic law, and the peculiar restrictions to which the sufferer was subjected, as well as the ritual of his cleansing, in the rare cases where the disease wore itself out, are best explained by being considered as symbolical rather than as sanitary. It was taken as an emblem of sin. Its hideous symptoms, its rotting sores, its slow, stealthy, steady progress, its defiance of all known means of cure, made its victim only too faithful a walking image of that worse disease. Remembering this deeper aspect of leprosy, let us study this miracle before us, and try to gather its lessons.

**I. First, then, notice the leper's cry.**

Mark connects the story with our Lord's first journey through Galilee, which was signalised by many miracles, and had excited much stir and talk. The news of the Healer had reached the isolated huts where the lepers herded, and had kindled a spark of hope in one poor wretch, which emboldened him to break through all regulations, and thrust his tainted and unwelcome presence into the shrinking crowd. He seems to have appeared there suddenly, having forced or stolen his way somehow into Christ's presence. And there he was, with his horrible white face, with his tightened, glistening skin, with some frowsy rag over his mouth, and a hunted look as of a wild beast in his eyes. The crowd shrank back from him; he had no difficulty in making his way to where Christ is sitting, calmly teaching. And Mark's vivid narrative shows him to us, flinging himself down before the Lord, and, without waiting for question or pause, interrupting whatever was going on, with his piteous cry. Misery and wretchedness make short work of conventional politeness.

Note the keen sense of misery that impels to the passionate desire for relief. A leper with the flesh dropping off his bones could not suppose that there was nothing the matter with him. His disease was too gross and palpable not to be felt; and the depth of misery measured the earnestness of desire. The parallel fails us there. The emblem is all insufficient, for here is the very misery of our deepest misery, that we are unconscious of it, and sometimes even come to love it. There are forms of sickness in which the man goes about, and to each inquiry says, I am perfectly well, though everybody else can see death written on his face. And so it is with this terrible malady that has laid its corrupting and putrefying finger upon us all. The worse we are, the less we know that there is anything the matter with us; and the deeper the leprosy has struck its filthy fangs into us, the more ready we are to say that we are sound. We preachers have it for one of our first duties to try to rouse men to the recognition of the facts of their spiritual condition, and all our efforts are too often--as I, for my part, sometimes half despairingly feel when I stand in the pulpit--like a firebrand dropped into a pond, which hisses for a moment and then is extinguished. Men and women sit in pews listening contentedly and quietly, who, if they saw themselves, I do not say even as God sees them, but as others see them, would know that the leprosy is deep in them, and the taint patent to every eye. I do not charge you, my brother, with gross transgressions of plain moralities; I know nothing about that. I know this: As face answereth to face in a glass, so doth the heart of man to man, and I bring this message, verified to me by my own consciousness, that we have all gone astray, and wounds and bruises and putrefying soresmark us all. If the best of us could see himself for once, in the light of God, as the worst of us will see himself one day, the cry would come from the purest lips, Oh! wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death?--this life in death that I carry, rotting and smelling foul to Heaven, about with me, wheresoever I go.

Note, further, this man's confidence in Christ's power: Thou canst make me clean. He had heard all about the miracles that were being wrought up and down over the country, and he came to the Worker, with nothing of the nature of religious faith in Him, but with entire confidence, based upon the report of previous miracles, in Christ's ability to heal. I do not suppose that in its nature it was very different from the trust with which savages will crowd round a traveller who has a medicine-chest with him, and expect to be cured of their diseases. But still it was real confidence in our Lord's power to heal. As a rule, though not without exceptions, He required (we may perhaps say He needed) such confidence as a condition of His miracle-working power.

If we turn from the emblem to the thing signified, from the leprosy of the body to that of the spirit, we may be sure of Christ's omnipotent ability to cleanse from the extremest severity of the disease, however inveterate and chronic it may have become. Sin dominates men by two opposite lies. I have said how hard it is to get people's consciences awakened to see the facts of their moral and religious condition; but then, when they are waked up, it is almost as hard to keep them from the other extreme. The devil, first of all, says to a man, It is only a little sin. Do it; you will be none the worse. You can give it up when you like, you know. That is the language before the act. Afterwards, his language is, first, You have done no harm, never mind what people say about sin. Make yourself comfortable, and then, when that lie wears itself out, the mask is dropped, and this is what is said: I have got you now, and you cannot get away. Done is done! What thou hast written thou hast written; and neither thou nor anybody else can blot it out. Hence the despair into which awakened consciences are apt to drop, and the feeling, which dogs the sense of evil like a spectre, of the hopelessness of all attempts to make oneself better. Brethren, they are both lies; the lie that we are pure is the first; the lie that we are too black to be purified is the second. If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and make God a liar, but if we say, as some of us, when once our consciences are stirred, are but too apt to say, We have sinned, and it cleaves to us for ever, we deceive ourselves still worse, and still more darkly and doggedly contradict the sure word of God. Christ's blood atones for all past sin, and has power to bring forgiveness to every one. Christ's vital Spirit will enter into any heart, and, abiding there, has power to make the foulest clean.

Note, again, the leper's hesitation. If Thou wilt--he had no right to presume on Christ's good will. He knew nothing about the principles upon which His miracles were wrought and His mercy extended. He supposed, no doubt, as he was bound to suppose, in the absence of any plain knowledge, that it was a mere matter of accident, of caprice, of momentary inclination and good nature, to whom the gift of healing should come. And so he draws near with the modest If Thou wilt; not pretending to know more than he knew, or to have a claim which he had not. But his hesitation is quite as much entreaty as hesitation. What do we mean when we say about a man, He can do it, if he likes, but to imply that it is so easy to do it, that it would be cruel not to do it? And so, when the leper said, If Thou wilt, Thou canst, he meant, There is no obstacle standing between me and health but Thy will, and surely it cannot be Thy will to leave me in this life in death. He, as it were, throws the responsibility for his health or disease upon Christ's shoulders, and thereby makes the strongest appeal to that loving heart.

We stand on another level. The leper's hesitation is our certainty. We know the principle upon which His mercy is dispensed; we know that it is a universal, all-embracing love; we know that no caprice nor passing spasm of good nature lies at the bottom of it. We know that if any men are not healed, it is not because Christ will not, but because they will not. If ever there springs in our hearts the dark doubt If Thou wilt, which was innocent in this man in the twilight of his knowledge, but is wrong in us in the full noontide of ours, we ought to be able to banish it at once, and to lay none of the responsibility of our continuing unhealed on Christ, but all on ourselves. He has laid it there, when He lamented, How often would I--and ye would not!Nothing can be more in accordance with the will of God, of which Jesus Christ is the embodiment, than to deliver men from sin, which is the opposite of His will.

**II. Notice, secondly, the Lord's answer.**

Mark's record of this incident puts the miracle in very small compass, and dilates rather upon the attitude and mind of Jesus Christ preparatory to it. As if, apart altogether from the supernatural element and the lessons that are to be drawn from it, it was worth our while to ponder, for the gladdening of our hearts and the strengthening of our hopes, that lovely picture of sheer simple compassion and tender-heartedness. Jesus, moved with compassion--a clause which occurs only in Mark's account--put forth His hand and touched him, and said, I will; be thou clean. Note, then, three things--the compassion, the touch, the word.

As to the first, is it not a precious boon for us, in the midst of our many wearinesses and sorrows and sicknesses, to have that picture of Jesus Christ bending over the leper, and sending, as it were, a gush of pitying love from His heart to flood away all his miseries? It is a true revelation of the heart of Jesus Christ. Simple pity is its very core. That pity is eternal, and subsists as He sits in the calm of the heavens, even as it was manifest whilst He sat teaching in the humble house in Galilee. For we have not a High Priest which cannot be touched with a feeling of our infirmities. The pitying Christ is near us all. Nor let us forget that it is this swift shoot of pity which underlies all that follows--the touch, the word, and the cure. Christ does not wait to be moved by the prayers that come from these leprous lips, but He is moved by the leprous lips themselves. The sight of the man affects His pitying heart, which sets in motion all the wheels of His healing powers. So we may learn that the impulse to which His redeeming activity owes its origin wells up from His own heart. Show Him sorrow, and He answers it by a pity of such a sort that it is restless till it helps and assuages. We may rise higher. The pity of Jesus Christ is the summit of His revelation of the Father, and, looking upon that gentle heart, into whose depths we can see as through a little window by these words of my text, we must stand with hushed reverence as beholding not only the compassion of the Man, but therein manifested the pity of the God who, Like as a father pitieth his children, pitieth them that fear Him, and pities yet more the more miserable men who fear and love Him not. The Christian's God is no impassive Being, indifferent to mankind, but One who in all our afflictions is afflicted, and, in His love and in His pity, redeems and bears and carries.

Note, still further, the Lord's touch. With swift obedience to the impulse of His pity, Christ thrusts forth His hand and touches the leper. There was much in that touch, but whatever more we may see in it, we should not be blind to the loving humanity of the act. Remember that the man kneeling there had felt no touch of a hand for years; that the very kisses of his own children and his wife's embrace of love were denied him. And now Jesus puts out His hand, and, without thinking of Mosaic restrictions and ceremonial prohibitions, yields to the impulse of His pity, and gives assurance of His sympathy and His brotherhood, as He lays His pure fingers upon the rotting ulcers. All men that help their fellows must be contented thus to identify themselves with them and to take them by the hand, if they would seek to deliver them from their evils.

Remember, too, that according to the Mosaic law it was forbidden to any but the priest to touch a leper. Therefore, in this act, beautiful as it is in its uncalculated humanity, there may have been something intended of a deeper kind. Our Lord thereby does one of two things--either He asserts His authority as overriding that of Moses and all his regulations, or He asserts His sacerdotal character. Either way there is a great claim in the act.

Further, we may take that touch of Christ's as being a parable of His whole work. It was a piece of wonderful sympathy and condescension that He should put out His hand to touch the leper; but it was the result of a far greater and more wonderful piece of sympathy and condescension that He had a hand to touch him with. For the sweet human hands and lips and eyeswhich He wore in this world were assumed by Him in order that He might make Himself one with all sufferers and bear the burden of all their sins. So His touch of the leper symbolises His identifying of Himself with mankind, the foulest and the most degraded; and in this connection there is a profound meaning in one of the ordinarily trivial legends of the Rabbis, who, founding upon a word of the fifty-third chapter of Isaiah, tell us that when Messias comes He will be found sitting amongst the lepers at the gate of the city. So He was numbered amongst the transgressors in His life, and with the wicked in His death. He touches, and, touching, contracts no impurity, cleansing as the sunlight and the fire do, by burning up the impurity, and not by receiving it into Himself.

Note the Lord's word, I will; be thou clean. It is shaped, convolution for convolution, so to speak, to match the man's prayer. He ever moulds His response according to the feebleness and imperfection of the petitioner's faith. But, at the same time, what a ring of autocratic authority and conscious sovereignty there is in the brief, calm, imperative word, I will; be thou clean!He accepts the leper's ascription of power; He claims to work the miracle by His own will, and therein He is either guilty of what comes very near arrogant blasphemy, or He is rightly claiming for Himself a divine prerogative. If His word can tell as a force on material things, what is the conclusion? He who spake and it was doneis Almighty and Divine.

**III. Lastly, note the immediate cure.**

Mark tells, with his favourite word straightway, how as soon as Christ had spoken, the leprosy departed from the leper. And to turn from the symbol to the fact, the same sudden and complete cleansing is possible for us. Our cleansing from sin must depend upon the present love and present power of Jesus Christ. On account of Christ's sacrifice, whose efficacy is eternal and lies at the foundation of all our blessedness and our purity until the heavens shall be no more, we are forgiven our sins and our guilt is taken away. By the present indwelling of that cleansing Spirit of the ever-living Christ, which will be given to us each if we seek it, we are cleansed day by day from our evil. The blood of Jesus Christ cleanseth from all sin, not only when shed as propitiatory, but when applied as sanctifying. We must come to Christ, and there must be a real living contact between us and Him through our faith, if we are to possess either the forgiveness or the cleansing which are wrapped up inseparable in His gift.

Further, the suddenness of this cure and its completeness may be reproduced in us. People tell us that to believe in sudden conversion is fanatical. This is not the place to argue that question. It seems to me that such suddenness is in accordance with analogy. And I, for my part, preach with full belief and in the hope that the words may not be spoken altogether in vain to every man, woman, and child listening to me, irrespective of their condition, character, and past, that there is no reason why they should not go to Him straightway; no reason why He should not put out His hand straightway and touch them; no reason why their leprosy should not pass from them straightway, and they lie down to sleep to-night accepted in the Belovedand cleansed in Him. Trust Him and He will do it.

Only remember, it was of no use to the leper that crowds had been healed, that floods of blessing had been poured over the land. What he wanted was that a rill should come and refresh his own lips. If you wish to have Christ's cleansing you must make personal work of it, and come with this prayer, On me be all that cleansing shown!You do not need to go to Him with an Ifnor a prayer, for His gift has not waited for our asking, and He has anticipated us by coming with healing in His wings. The parts are reversed, and He prays you to receive the gift, and stands before each of us with the gentle remonstrance upon His lips, Why will ye die when I am here ready to cure you?Take Him at His word, for He offers to us all, whether we desire it or no, the cleansing which we need. Take Him at His word, trust Him wholly, trust to His death for forgiveness, to His sanctifying Spirit for cleansing, and straightwayyour leprosy will depart from you, and your flesh shall become like the flesh of a little child, and you shall be clean.